

The Female Quest  
in the Novels of Alice Walker

by

Lesley Margaret Pears Miles

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the Department of English,  
University of Cape Town,  
South Africa.

September, 1987

The University of Cape Town has been given  
the right to reproduce this thesis in whole  
or in part. Copyright is held by the author.

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iv
Poem: "Remember" Alice Walker	v
CHAPTER ONE:	
Introduction	1
CHAPTER TWO:	
<u>Grange Copeland: Following in the footsteps of Invisible Man</u>	26
Grange Copeland's Quest	29
Grange Goes North: Separation & Initiation	38
Grange's Return	49
Ruth: Hope for the Future	52
CHAPTER THREE:	
The Female Quest in <u>Meridian</u> : A Quest for Vision	59
Splitting off from family, husbands, lovers	66
Green-world guide/green-world lover	76
Confrontation with parental figures/Plunge into the unconscious	89
Conclusion	102
CHAPTER FOUR:	
The Female Quest in <u>The Color Purple</u> : A Community in Quest	114
Female Bonding and the Quest	130
Shug Avery	137
Celie and Shug	142
Celie, Anger and God	149
Celie and Economics	157
Finale	159
BIBLIOGRAPHY	169

## ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the development of the quest motif in Alice Walker's novels, from a male quest in the first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, to the female quests which supersede it in the two later novels, Meridian and The Color Purple. In this analysis, brief reference is made to Walker's poetry, essays, and short stories, as well as to texts by black male writers and other Afro-American women writers.

In Chapter One, the Introduction, after a brief resume of Walker's background, I outline some of the historical circumstances of black women in America which inform the writing of Afro-American women. The era of slavery played a crucial role in forming a set of demeaning stereotypes in terms of which black women are perceived in American culture, and which these writers are concerned to resist.

Annis Pratt, Carol Christ, and Elizabeth Baer are three feminist critics who have written about the female quest as distinct from the male quest, and in the same chapter I draw from their work in order to contextualise my own. Using the platform of Joseph Campbell's classic quest grid, these critics attempt to discover how women write about quest in societies where options for self-development for women are restricted. Identity is a central concern of the quest in women's writing. Yet the notion of "identity" as a stable construct has been questioned in post-Lacanian thought, in

particular, by some French feminist theorists. I choose, however, not to apply a reading based on their theories. Rather, in the context of black women's situation in American culture, I accept the terms of Walker's texts and her notions of "identity" and "wholeness." I conclude the chapter with a brief survey of the concerns of black feminist criticism.

In Chapter Two, I analyse the trajectory of the quest motif in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, in terms of its significance for black people in the South. Here, a traditional pattern is used to depict a non-traditional questing hero--a poor black sharecropper. Race is a central issue in this quest. The primary achievements of Grange Copeland's quest are, firstly, the assumption of personal responsibility for his life and actions, and secondly, an attitude of overt resistance to whites. Yet as important as these gains are, they are not enough, in Alice Walker's terms, for "wholeness," which is achieved to a greater degree in the female quests of the following two novels. A "latent" female quest in this novel can be discerned, however, in the character of Ruth, who embodies values which Grange lacks.

One could say that Ruth's quest is taken up and realised in the novel Meridian, which is the concern of Chapter Three. In this chapter I use the schema developed by Annis Pratt to analyse Meridian as a female quest in which a rapprochement between the social and the spiritual

is seen as necessary for the transformation of society. In Meridian, the central quester, Meridian Hill, discovers a source of strength in the cultural heritage of black women. In her quest, the community as a source of value is highlighted. Yet she is still a solitary hero who undertakes her quest journey fundamentally alone.

This points to the primary change that takes place in the next novel, The Color Purple. Here, the hero as the domestic drudge at the heart of her community is unable to take the journey that the quester traditionally does. In this novel, the quest ceases to be the solitary journey of an individual hero, but becomes the quest of a whole community, in which the development of the epistolary narrator, Celie, is intimately linked with the development of the other characters in the novel. Female bonding as a strategy for resistance to patriarchal oppression is emphasised, and a visionary state of potential community is presented as the final aim of the quest. I conclude this chapter with a more distanced perspective in which the quests in the three novels, taken together, are seen as a play of rhythmic cycles, which, by their form, suggest the potential for further quests.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Dorothy Driver, for her guidance, encouragement, meticulous reading of the manuscript, and the standards of excellence that she consistently sets. I would like also to thank Kay McCormick for her useful supervision at a time when Dr. Driver was away.

Secondly, I thank all of those friends who made helpful suggestions in private discussions and who supplied me with articles and books, moral support, and practical assistance in the form of computers, printers and transport. In particular, these were Julia Martin, Angela Schaffer, Dr. Wendy Woodward, Anne Mayne, Anne Solomons, Dr. Susan Gardner, Tina Barsby, Jill Wenman, Dr. Leslie London, Richard Goode and Steve Munitz. I would like to express my appreciation to Khanya College for the use of their printer and photo-copier. My mother, Julia Miles, provided financial assistance at unexpected moments and I am very thankful to her for that. I am grateful to Eva Hunter for the suggestion which was instrumental in leading me to the topic for this thesis.

Finally, I thank my companion, Henri de Guise Laurie, for his unfailing support, belief in my abilities, perceptive reading of the manuscript, active engagement in the issues of this study, and shouldering of the domestic burdens of our household at crucial times. I would also like to thank him for his proofreading of the final draft.

Remember?

Remember me?  
I am the girl  
with the dark skin  
whose shoes are thin  
I am the girl  
with rotted teeth  
I am the dark  
rotten-toothed girl  
with the wounded eye  
and the melted ear.

I am the girl  
holding their babies  
cooking their meals  
sweeping their yards  
washing their clothes  
Dark and rotting  
and wounded, wounded.

I would give  
to the human race  
only hope.

I am the woman  
with the blessed  
dark skin  
I am the woman  
with teeth repaired  
I am the woman  
with the healing eye  
the ear that hears.

I am the woman: Dark,  
repaired, healed  
Listening to you.

I would give  
to the human race  
only hope.

I am the woman  
offering two flowers  
whose roots  
are twin

Justice and Hope

Let us begin.

Alice Walker, Horses (1)



## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

You ask about "preoccupations." I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women.... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world. (Alice Walker, qtd. in John O'Brien 192)

Alice Walker's background as the daughter of sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia, informs much of her writing. Her persistent identification is with the Deep South, and she grounds her work--fiction, poetry, and essays--primarily in the history and experience of the South and Southern black people. Her interests revolve around the Southern black family, the spiritual survival of the black community, the violence of black men towards black women, and above all, "the young black women whose rocky road I am still traveling" (Walker, qtd. in O'Brien 211). In an essay she says:

No-one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. (Mother's Gardens 21)

Walker herself has experienced, and struggled with, loneliness as a child, poverty, disablement, abortion, marriage and divorce, and the stress of political activism in the Civil Rights Movement. The bleakness of some of these themes appears in her writing, but her optimism and her insistence on the possibilities of survival are clear. She says quite simply: "Yes, I believe in change: change personal, and change in society. I have experienced a revolution (unfinished, without question, but one whose new order is everywhere on view) in the South" (qtd. in O'Brien 194). Yet, although racism is an important theme in her work, Walker does not primarily write, as did many black male writers of this century like James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, among others, about the confrontation between white and black. Instead she says:

I can't think of any twentieth-century black woman writer who is first and foremost interested in what white folks think.... Twentieth-century black women writers all seem to be much more interested in the black community, in intimate relationships, with the white world as a backdrop, which is certainly the appropriate perspective, in my view. (qtd. in Tate 181)

Within this focus, Alice Walker is a quester. She searches for transformation on many levels: political and social; personal, spiritual and religious. She seeks for ways of understanding human behaviour and of translating her insights into the possibilities for grappling with the injustices of society. Her optimism and her search for

ways to live, particularly for black women, manifests itself in her novels through the motif of the quest.

The concern of this thesis is the nature of that quest. The female quest is different from the male quest, and the quest of black women different again. The subjugations of race, gender and class have historically intersected to victimise Afro-American women in ways which can be distinguished from the oppressions suffered by white women and black men in a patriarchal, racist society. Targets of racial and sexual subordination in white American society, black women also suffer from sexism directed towards them by black men. The singular history of black women in American culture--slavery in particular--informs much of the writing by Afro-American women. The slave era was crucial in forming cultural attitudes towards Afro-American women and also in creating conditions which encouraged in them qualities of strength and stoicism. Black slave women, as Gerda Lerner, Angela Davis, and Bell Hooks convincingly argue, were treated differently from black slave men.

The major area in which this difference was manifested was sexual. While both men and women were subject to beatings and mutilation, black women were exposed to sexual abuse of various kinds. Sexual coercion in the form of accepted practices such as sexual assault and "breeding" became used as an instrument of economic exploitation and control over black women. Hooks argues that the sexual licence that the slaveholding class practised towards black

female slaves, coupled with the repressive morality of the nineteenth century, led to the perception of black women as the repositories of sexuality, and as such, evil and wanton "jezebels" and "temptresses" (33). White men displaced their feelings of sexual guilt onto black women by blaming them for the sexual abuse that they themselves perpetrated. The stereotype of the evil black woman persists today, as Hooks notes in her discussion of black women and the media (85). This ideological complex has roots going back into the European Middle Ages. Sander Gilman has traced the history and forms of an iconography of female sexuality in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, showing the association of black women with sexuality, and in particular, deviant sexuality.<sup>1</sup> This iconography, combined with the circumstances of colonialism in America, informed the way that the slaveholding class viewed black female slaves--as sexual animals. The particular exigencies of slavery added to the development of the rise of a series of stereotypical cultural images of black women which were incorporated into the dominant culture of America. (These were not only overtly sexual. The "Black Mammy," or matriarch, and the Aunt Jemima figure which persist in American culture also have their roots in slavery.)

---

1. Although Gilman provides information important for feminism, I agree with Jane Marcus's criticism of his objectifying discourse, with its reproductions of the medical drawings of women's genitals, and the cartoons and paintings of the period which he studies. This discourse, says Marcus, "reinforces by its objectivity the pathology it pretends to analyze" (4).

In terms of Victorian morality, upper-class white women in America, were, on the other hand, seen as idealised, non-sexual beings, subject to a highly repressive sexual code. This is not, of course, a simple dichotomy. In terms of this morality, the "virgin" all too easily becomes seen as "whore"; the image of the fallen woman is frequent in Victorian iconography, as is that of the white prostitute. And working-class women in the nineteenth-century would have been totally unable to attain the ideal of the "perfect lady"--although, as Martha Vicinus points out, the ideal of moral purity was admired and upheld by many working-class people in Britain. But black women, by virtue of their blackness, would be excluded from this ideal in the eyes of white American society. "Black women, like poor white women, were bad women" (E. Francis White 13).<sup>2</sup> Paula Giddings observes that black women, unable to live up to the nineteenth-century "cult of true womanhood" with its "cardinal tenets of domesticity, submissiveness, piety, and purity ..." would have been seen as less than "true" women (47) in white culture. She quotes Lerner: "Victorian morality applied to the 'better' classes only. It was taken for granted during the period and well into the 20th century that working-class women--and especially Black women--were freely available for sexual use by upper-class males (49)."<sup>3</sup>

2. This formulation can break down, as White shows in her example of Uncle Tom's Cabin (13).

3. A detailed discussion of other issues connected with race and gender in slavery--for example the division of

The specific circumstances of black women in the history of the U.S.A, which I have touched upon very briefly here, form the subtext of much black women's writing. One of the major concerns of these writers--novelists, playwrights and poets--including writers like Walker, Paule Marshall, Ntozake Shange, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, to name only a few, is to resist, or "write against" the cultural stereotypes of patriarchy, so pervasive and demeaning to black women, which have arisen from these circumstances. The form that this resistance often takes is the search for what these writers see as an authentic, viable identity. Faith Pullin says:

It has been said that much of American literature is concerned with establishing a sense of identity: this is particularly so in the case of Black American women who have always had to struggle against the definitions imposed on them by others, not least by Black men. (174)

And Barbara Smith observes that "sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writings..." ("Towards" 174). (It is true that the notion of a stable, unitary "identity" has become problematic in post-Lacanian thought. I return to discuss this issue shortly.) In Walker's three novels--The Third Life of Grange Copeland (referred to hereafter as Grange Copeland), The Color Purple, and Meridian--the quest motif

---

labour, the position of black slave men vis-a-vis black slave women, and the influence of African cultures on the cultural practices of both slave communities and slave-holders, is outside the scope of this thesis. Davis, Hooks and White offer useful discussions of these issues.

is the vehicle for this search. Joseph Campbell maintains that, if a quest is successful, the hero returns, transfigured, carrying a "life-transmuting trophy" (193) for the "restoration of society" (196). What Campbell is talking about here, of course, is the male quest. In Walker's novels, although there is on one occasion a male quest, the female quests which supersede it reach further and risk more. In her novels, a fascinating pattern can be discerned, in which Walker experiments with Campbell's classic model for the quest--which sees the quest in terms of separation, initiation, and return--and transforms it to provide a paradigm for the liberation of black women.

The female quest as distinct from the male quest (as defined by theorists such as Campbell, Northrop Frye and C.G. Jung), is a theme that has engaged feminist critics before me. (None of the critics I mention distinguish the quest in black women's writing from that of white, although Annis Pratt, Carol Christ and Rachel Blau DuPlessis discuss white and black writers.) These critics have noted the disjunction between desire and possibility which is so deeply a feature of female experience in patriarchal societies. The collection of essays entitled The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development, edited by Elizabeth Abel et al, amply documents the various ways this disjunction manifests itself in novels of female development produced by women writers; in the form of truncated or distorted development patterns, for example, or a conventional surface

plot concealing a submerged plot which "encodes rebellion" (Abel et al 12). In their discussion of the female Bildungsroman, the novel of female development or social quest, Abel et al note that "while male protagonists [of the Bildungsroman] struggle to find an hospitable context in which to realise their aspirations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever" (6-7). At every stage of the development of the female hero her desires for self-actualisation clash with social norms and forces tending to confine her to "feminine" roles and behaviour. "[T]he female protagonist or Bildungsheld must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the cost of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society, between the price of succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive 'normality'" (Abel et al 12-13).

The female "rebirth quest" is one of the major themes in Pratt's Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction. This she sees as similar to women's "spiritual quest" which is the focus of Christ's Diving Deep and Surfacing. Elizabeth Baer, in a dissertation entitled "The Pilgrimage Inward": The Quest Motif in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and Jean Rhys, analyses three texts in an attempt to discover whether "the female quest [is] significantly different from the male quest" (2). On the other hand, DuPlessis differentiates between the fiction of contemporary women writers and earlier ones,



suggesting that "[t]he quest plots of twentieth-century women writers incorporate a critical response both to the ending in death and to the ending in marriage, once obligatory goals for the female protagonist" (Writing Beyond 142). Missy Dehn Kubitschek analyses Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God as a quest with a central female quester. These critics all use Campbell as the starting-point for their analyses. Baer says:

The symbols, metaphors and plots of the quest motif in women's literature are being re-examined by a number of contemporary feminist critics who are asking whether Campbell's grid, the classic analysis of the quest motif, can be accurately used to describe the journeys which female characters make. (5)

Pratt, like Baer and Christ, thinks that Campbell's definition is inappropriate for women. She makes a systematic attempt to define a pattern of female quest which is parallel to Campbell's quest yet incorporates the particular difficulties which women face.

She begins with Campbell's model for the male quest--'separation-initiation-return--itself based on the Jungian archetype of the hero's quest. This model, as Campbell developed it, with its many subsections,<sup>4</sup> takes the masculine as the norm for human experience. In this journey (the quest usually takes the form of a journey) women do not exist in their own right. They exist for the

---

4. Campbell defines seventeen subsections in all. A few examples are: "The Call to Adventure," "The Meeting with the Goddess," and "Master of the Two Worlds."

male hero of the quest, symbolising stages in his evolution within the skeletal framework that Campbell designates.

Campbell maintains that "[w]oman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the total of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know" (116). Even though he does acknowledge that a woman can be a hero, she still ends up subordinate to a male, and subject to coercion: "And when the adventurer, in this context, is not a youth but a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her, and conducts her to his bed--whether she will or no" (118-119; my emphasis).

Pratt examined a wide range of novels by women writers (about 300 novels), ranging over three centuries. She found in these novels recurring patterns which, within a framework of the Jungian theory of archetypes, she synthesized and described as "archetypal images." These she sees as "literary forms that derive from unconscious originals" (Archetypal Patterns 3). Pratt insists upon the necessity for an inductive approach to literary works, in which archetypal patterns are induced "from images, symbols, and narrative patterns observed in a significantly various selection of literary works" (5). The major archetype which she delineates in the fiction that she studies is the quest motif. In the final chapters from Archetypal Patterns, on "Novels of Rebirth and Transformation," Pratt considers four novels by different authors, namely Margaret

Atwood, Anais Nin, Doris Lessing and Virginia Woolf, whom she thinks make conscious use of this archetype in an attempt to create structures of transformation for the lives of women now. On the basis of these novels she formulates a quest pattern for women consisting of five stages. These are: (1) splitting off from family, husbands, lovers; (2) the green-world guide or token; (3) the green-world lover; (4) confrontation with parental figures; and (5) the plunge into the unconscious. She stresses that this pattern need not be linear, suggesting that a cyclic one is more usual for women. Pratt proposes that mythic counterparts to the archetypes found in this "rebirth" fiction are the Greek Demeter/Persephone narrative, the Sumerian Ishtar/Tammuz narratives, and the Craft of the Wise, or witchcraft, from pre-Christian Europe.

It appears that Pratt's attempt is to define a schema for the female quest with a similar form to that defined by Campbell, although less complex. This is an ambitious and courageous project. Yet it is problematic. Lacking flexibility, it can all too easily become reductive when applied to a literary work. And a text which appears to conform to Pratt's schema can on closer inspection be found to differ quite markedly--The Color Purple, for example. I discovered that the only one of Walker's three novels to which I could apply Pratt's system with some consistency was Meridian. It yielded a rewarding interpretation of this novel.

Baer notes that the dissatisfaction of feminist critics with male interpretations has resulted in the "re-vision" of the myths and archetypes of women (6-7). She quotes Adrienne Rich: "Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence 35). Baer suggests further that

the literature written by women in recent years has itself been a "re-vision." Women do not often end up as "consorts," though the quest motif is used frequently. More often, the journey becomes a metaphor in women's fiction for the experiences of contemporary women: expansion of consciousness, role changes, the movement from the private to the public sphere, changing concepts of identity, rediscovery and integration of the self. (6-7)

Like Pratt, Baer used Campbell as a springboard from which to examine the three texts she studied. Unlike Pratt, she did not attempt to systematize a series of stages differentiating the female from the male quests. What she discovered as a common feature of the three texts--Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, Doris Lessing's The Four-Gated City, and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing--was a dual text; the surface text containing the traditional quest pattern as described by Campbell, and a subtext based on the mythic structure of fairy-tale. She observes that

[i]n the very structure of their novels, Atwood, Lessing and Rhys achieve both the excoriation of the male-as-norm paradigm of quest and the creation of new paradigms. In so doing,

they acknowledge that women's experience has historically differed from men's and they call for a depiction of that difference in fiction. (7)

Christ distinguishes between the "social"--relating to women's place in society including the political, the personal and the realm of work--and the "spiritual" quests in women's writing. For Christ these are "two aspects of a single struggle" (9) and she sees as incorrect the philosophical view that separates the social (or material) and spiritual. She chooses, however, to focus on the spiritual quest, which for her incorporates a dimension lacking in the social quest and takes a distinctive form in women's fiction and poetry. It begins in an "experience of nothingness," which Christ identifies as the fundamental experience of women in patriarchal society. This precedes an "awakening," often occurring through mystical experience, which "grounds her in a new sense of self and a new orientation in the world." In this "awakening" the "great powers" (used by Christ as a general term for divinity) are experienced as both within and without, both immanent and transcendent. Christ suggests that the results of this awakening are to be seen in a "new naming" of self and reality by women writers, which reflects a sense of "wholeness" implicitly or explicitly challenging to the assumptions of dualism which underlie Western thinking (13).

The issue of "naming" has been explored by other feminist theorists such as Andrea Dworkin, Dale Spender and

The issue of "naming" has been explored by other feminist theorists such as Andrea Dworkin, Dale Spender and Mary Daly. These theorists see the power to name as one that women will have to grasp for themselves in order to challenge patriarchy. Toril Moi, while not denying this as an important strategy, points out the difficulties of the project: "The attempt to fix meaning is always in part doomed to failure, for it is of the nature of meaning to be always already elsewhere" (160).

It is evident that Christ accepts unproblematically (as, to a large extent, do the other critics I have discussed) the notion that language can mirror women's experience, and that "women's stories" (12) reflect this new "wholeness" (13). As Moi's objection reflects, this notion has been questioned by the "French" line of feminist theory which draws, as Ellen Cronan Rose observes, "on Jacques Lacan's semiotic revision of Freudian theory, [and] maintains that since 'experience' is constructed in and by a language which is constitutively masculine, women's experience cannot be authentically represented" (12).

Nonetheless, Walker's project defines itself in different terms. Most clearly, The Color Purple can be read in the way Christ describes the spiritual quest, and "naming," which is women's assertion of their right to seize language and use it to reflect their experience, is particularly important in the novel. This issue revolves around the question of identity. As we have seen, Walker's

work shares with many other women writers--white and black--the idea of "rebirth" into a new self, or new identity, as the goal of the quest. This idea is indeed central to the work of many contemporary Afro-American women writers.

Mary Helen Washington states:

There is a consistently heroic and articulate voice. The women who had once been described as "the mules of the world" chose for themselves some new imagery: the hardiness and resiliency of black-eyed susans, the hunger and yearning of the mysterious midnight bird: they are seeing themselves as reborn, creators of a new world in which new values prevail. ("New Lives" 3)

As I moved into researching this thesis, my own originally unquestioned assumptions about the nature of identity became problematic, particularly since becoming aware of the Lacanian notion of the "split subject" and its consequences for the concept of identity. In Sexual/Textual Politics Moi criticises established Anglo-American feminists for unquestioningly accepting the notion of identity. She maintains that the "seamlessly unified self" (8) implied by this notion is fundamentally a humanist concept, that the self so posited is patriarchal and phallic, and that "the search for a unified individual self, or gender identity or indeed 'textual identity' in the literary work must be seen as drastically reductive" (10). According to Moi, Anglo-American critics have taken over this idea from traditional humanism without questioning the basic assumptions involved. Moi dismisses black (and

lesbian) feminist criticism--a discourse to which I will shortly return--on the same grounds.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible in the scope of this thesis to enter adequately into this debate. At the same time, it is true that black American women writers--and critics--do not appear to question a traditional model of identity, except to the extent that the content of that identity is changed. However, it became apparent to me how urgent was the project for black women writers--that of changing the cultural definitions of black women and asserting a sense of self-worth and selfhood for black women in the context of a society in which the dominant discourses work to render black women at worst, invisible, and at best, distorted versions of themselves. It appeared, therefore, that to criticise the grounds on which this attempt is based would at this point be unconstructive. Secondly, it seems inappropriate to impose on Afro-American women a theory which is rooted in such a different cultural context as the post-structuralist reading of Freud as presented by Lacan. The suggestion by Henry Louis Gates Jr., that "we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures" (13) is one which I endorse in this thesis.

---

5. Maggie Humm takes Toril Moi to task for this summary dismissal. She sees Moi as excluding black women "lesbian or not" from her frame of reference, and this "absence [as] typical of the racism and heterosexism of much feminist writing" (44).



This thesis, then, is not a critique of the notion of identity, although I would like to acknowledge the difficulty of defining and fixing such a notion. My attempt, rather, is to examine Walker's work in its own terms. Walker herself continually refers to the idea of "wholeness." To cite the interview quoted as epigraph to this chapter, she says: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people" (Walker, qtd. in O'Brien 192). And in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, the central character thinks: "But to survive whole was what he wanted for Ruth" (214). A useful perception of this issue in terms of The Color Purple is offered by Alison Light:

I would want to argue that a text like The Color Purple allows us to speak our rage or delight, or both, precisely because of its appeal to a unified self. It is this sense of "self", a coherent and powerful identity, which we must recognise both as an effect of language and as the fiction which keeps us sane and active. The problem then in teaching is how not to undermine the strategic importance of that pleasure in texts in creating real political solidarity--"everywoman's history"--whilst remaining critical of its forms and of any final fixing of that "identity" and "experience." For such a fixing can all too easily become a refusal and a wiping out of difference, a reinstatement of new but equally oppressive and authoritarian power structures. (131)

Walker's "personal historical view of black women" which she described in an interview affirms her ideas about the possibilities of a new "identity" for black women. She perceives black women moving in an evolutionary spiral of "three interrelated cycles: suspension, assimilation, and

emergence." Women finally emerge from a totally oppressed, victimised and exploited position in society, in which, says Walker, "life choices are so severely limited that they either kill themselves, retreat into insanity, or are simply defeated one way or another by the external circumstances of their lives" (qtd. in Washington, "Teaching Black-eyed Susans" 22). They develop to a situation in which they have some control over their lives. According to Walker, this process is both historical and psychological. The first phase she sees as corresponding with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second phase with the forties and fifties, and the third phase with the late sixties. Women of the third cycle, according to Walker, are women who were "influenced by the political events of the sixties and the changes resulting from the freedom movement. They are women coming just to the edge of a new awareness and making the first steps into an uncharted region" (22-23). The exploration of this development forms much of the content of Walker's work. I am concerned in this thesis with Walker's first and third phases--women of the second phase are not in evidence in Walker's novels. (They do, however, occur in her poetry and short stories.) The idea of cycles of development is, of course, one that others have articulated. In her study A Literature of Their Own, Elaine Showalter identifies what she sees as three historical stages for British women writers--Feminine, Feminist and Female. Frantz Fanon uses similar ideas in

his analysis of the effects of colonisation on the psyche of the black.

The female quest differs from a traditional male quest. The ways it does so are variable, as the broad, basic pattern is often similar. There are a few things, however, that can be said with certainty about the female quest. Primarily, a woman is the centre--the hero--of her own quest. In her discussion of Erich Neumann's study of the Amor and Psyche myth, Lee Edwards puts the case very strongly for the female hero as an emblem of humanity in contradistinction to the figure of the heroine, whom she sees as secondary to the male hero ("The Labors of Psyche"). Then, the journey in the quest is fundamental--whether geographical, psychic, or both. (This the female quest shares with the male quest.) Often, in women's fiction, the journey is an interior, psychic one. Certainly in Walker's work, journey in both senses is very important. Thirdly, the element of initiation--of undergoing trials and conflicts (usually involving a descent into the unconscious)--is often a feature in novels of female quest. The phase of return for women, however, appears to be problematic, as society is<sup>as</sup> yet unable to accommodate the aspirations of a woman. Pratt notes that "[t]he greater the personal development of a hero, the more true she is to herself and the more eccentric her relationship to the patriarchy.... A quality of consciousness that is essentially antisocial characterizes the most admirable

heroes" (Archetypal Patterns, 169). Many female quest novels end in ambiguity and openness rather than closure (as, of course, do many modernist and post-modernist texts). Atwood's Surfacing ends thus, as does Walker's Meridian.

Walker's novels amply demonstrate some of these variations. The three texts evince in themselves three "stages" of quest, cycles which do not, however, form a single, completed whole. The quest in Grange Copeland is a male quest. Yet an incipient female quest, suggested by the character of Ruth, is quite clear in the novel. This latent quest is explored in the two later novels, where the female characters are no longer too damaged, as they were in Grange Copeland, to be able to set out on a transformative journey. But in these texts it undergoes interesting alterations. As the female quest surfaces in Meridian, politics and spirituality are seen as "two aspects of a single struggle" (Christ 9). At the same time, Meridian affirms the values of community in a way which was not evident in Grange Copeland. Finally, in The Color Purple the quest ceases to be the quest of a single individual who embodies the aspirations of a group but becomes the quest of a whole community of people.

Although identity is the primary goal in all of these quests, its construction differs in each. I find what Pratt calls "authenticity" useful as a way of understanding how to read Walker's developing stance regarding identity. "Authenticity" Pratt says, depends on "totality of self--

the greatest possible exercise of our capacities for significant work, intellectual growth, political action, creativity, emotional development, sexual expression ..."

(6). "[T]otality of self" does not, for Walker, necessarily imply a fixed, unchanging, uncontradictory self. In each of Walker's novels the "greatest possible exercise of [her protagonists'] capacities" is varied. Each has his/her own motivations, needs, tasks, and fulfilments. For instance, the primary need of the epistolary narrator of The Color Purple, Celie, is to find her voice, to become enabled to speak--and not only to God. For Grange Copeland, the assumption of responsibility is the central feature of his self-knowledge. For Meridian Hill, the hero of Meridian, it is to discover how to live compassionately, and free from guilt, and yet at the same time consciously to fight oppressive social structures.

As I have already implied, not only is Walker working within a tradition of black American women writers, which in some respects differs from its white counterpart, but her texts also provide one of the bases from which current black feminist criticism springs. Personal and social growth and change with relation to community, history and the cultural heritage of black women are, as we have seen, recurring themes in the work of a whole body of contemporary black women writers. In response to, and in tandem with, this work, black female critics have begun to articulate a specifically "black" feminist criticism, and to measure

their distance from "white" feminist criticism, of which they have been sharply critical, primarily for its perpetration of the "invisibility" of black women in its discourse. According to black feminist critics, white feminist criticism either straightforwardly excludes the work of black women writers from critical studies and literary anthologies, or tends to make an analogy between "blacks" and "women," in which "[t]he very existence of black women ... disappears from an analogical discourse designed to express the types of oppression from which black women have the most to suffer" (Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonymy" 216). At the same time black feminist critics are engaged in tasks other than criticising white feminist critics. Washington, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Deborah McDowell, Susan Willis and Gloria T. Hull are a few of the critics engaged in the activity of analysing the work of black women writers with a view to the resurrection of forgotten writers, the revision of "misinformed critical opinions of them" (McDowell, "New Directions" 188), and systematising the themes, concerns, and history of black women writers. In a sense this is itself a search for self-definition. Hull asserts:

Clearly, a case for a tradition can be thematically based on black women writing about black women's experience. The "black experience," quiet as it's kept, is made up not only of what happens to black men but also of what happens to black women. Were it not for the black women writers themselves, this material would not be incorporated in the literature. These experiential and thematic differences

translate uniquely into form and style; and these formal, linguistic/stylistic similarities exist as a tradition among black women writers, sometimes even taking the form of inter-textual relationships, instances of one woman working from another's text. (13)

The concern of black feminist criticism is, as the quotation from Hull shows, to a large extent the search for commonalities in black women's writing. Washington, for example, feels that "black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives ..." ("In pursuit" xvi). Susan Willis delineates three areas of concern for black women writers--community, journey, and sensuality versus sexuality--which she thinks "focus and modulate the critical perspectives black women bring to their work" (212). McDowell calls for a rigorous textual analysis which would isolate "thematic, stylistic and linguistic commonalities" ("New Directions" 194) in black women's writing. These are important concerns. However, McDowell observes that a "separatist position" which concentrates on the work of black women writers, cannot be sustained ("New Directions" 196). Cora Kaplan puts this idea more strongly when she--crucially, in my view--emphasises the necessity of an intertextual reading of contemporary black women writers with both the literary works of other Americans (black and white) and the debate concerning the history and sociology of Afro-Americans:

These novels [by black women writers] dialogise the languages, black and white, in which race, class and gender have been discussed in America, but they demand to be read intertextually with other discourses, other fictions as part of a wider debate. Political and polemical, even didactic, their use and transformations of popular fictional forms, as well as their appropriation of modernist and post-modernist strategies, is [sic] specifically rooted in old and new debates about black cultural politics and its appropriate discursive forms, as much as if not more than in contemporary feminist discussions of analogous issues. (136-7)

Walker's consciousness of her cultural heritage is made clear in many of the essays in In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, as is the awareness of her participation in a tradition of earlier black women writers, dating from the nineteenth century. For her specific heritage she reaches back to writers like Phyllis Wheatley, Nella Larsen, Frances Watkins Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, and others, who have, as Kaplan says, been "a powerful influence on a younger generation of black women writers." Walker also acknowledges the influence of Southern white writers, both male and female. In addition, she is indebted to the writing of Gwendolyn Brooks and Paule Marshall, who, although writing before the emergence of the women's movement of the late sixties and early seventies, were nevertheless, as Kaplan notes, "deeply conscious of the 'triple oppression' of black women--the axes of race, class and gender, through which their subordination and struggle are lived." The difference between the writing of Walker's forebears and that of Walker herself and other black women



writers of the seventies and eighties, is that the post-seventies texts partake consciously of the "debate between black and white feminists about the ways in which American feminism, past and present, has been deeply complicit with racism" (Kaplan 136). Evidence of this debate is present throughout Walker's texts. There is evidence, too, of the reactionary racism that underpinned the Negritude movement as it emerged in the United States of America. In Grange Copeland, significantly, the major female character begins to reject such racism. But it is initially the male quest that this novel explores, and that I now turn to in my second chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

The Third Life of Grange Copeland--following in the  
footsteps of Invisible Man.

I can hear you say, "What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!" And you're right. I leap to agree with you. I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?

Ralph Ellison Invisible Man

"Since I'm already ready to rise up and they ain't, it seems to me I should rise up first and let them follow me."

Alice Walker Grange Copeland

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is a very realistic novel. I wanted it to be absolutely visual. I wanted the reader to be able to sit down, pick up that book and see a little of Georgia from the early twenties through the sixties--the trees, the hills, the dirt, the sky--to feel it, to feel the pain and struggle of the family, and the growth of the little girl Ruth. I wanted all of that to be very real. I didn't want there to be any evasion on the part of the reader. (Alice Walker, qtd. in Tate 176)

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is a novel about racial and gender oppression in the South in the period from the 1920s to the 1960s, a discourse which, in Christian's words, "exposes the pattern of terror over a span of sixty years in the lives of one black family of sharecroppers" (183). Poverty, violence, sexual abuse, misery and despair are the constituents of this pattern. Alice Walker analyses its socio-psychological roots and shows the self-perpetuating repetition of self-destruction in the lives of the sharecroppers. But she also shows how this pattern can be altered, as Klaus Ensslen suggests:

Half a century of family history is the narrative material used by the novel to dramatize essential changes in the conditions of black people in the rural South of the United States, beginning in total economic and psychological dependence and moving towards a certain measure of self-awareness as the ground for new self-concepts and the social roles or life-plans based on them. (191)

Given Walker's subsequent focus on female quest, and her preoccupation with black women, it is interesting that her first novel privileges a male quest, with the female quest in the novel a latent rather than a realised one.

Grange Copeland embarks on a quest. The women in the novel do not. Why not? Brownfield, his son, embarks on a quest but is stopped short by his own failings. Why does he fail while Grange, at least in some limited sense, succeeds? Ruth, his granddaughter, is presented as having a quest-in-potential. But what are the possibilities for her quest? To what extent are they adumbrated in this novel? To what extent are they left ambiguous? The novel, depicting as it does a male quest, provides a touchstone for discussing the female quests as they appear in the next two novels. What differences between the female and the male quests can be discerned here? How can they be linked to the particular social circumstances and milieu of the novels? In what ways--and why--does the male quest appear not to be able to provide, for Walker, a paradigm for a real transformation of society, as, for example, the quests in Meridian and The Color Purple do?

In exploring these questions I select aspects of Grange Copeland's quest for detailed analysis. At the same time I examine it with relation to the other two "quests" in the novel (Ruth's and Brownfield's), trying to show how and why Grange's quest "fails" or rather, does not fully succeed, both in its own terms and as compared to the other two. In addition I hope to demonstrate the significance of Grange's quest for the future, as represented by Ruth.

### Grange Copeland's Quest

Before scrutinising the trajectory of Grange Copeland's quest in the novel, it will be useful to glance at its form. On a structural level, the development of the quest motif in Grange Copeland is cyclical, as it is within the other two novels (and over all three). The patterns of repetition and variation which colour the quest motif in the novels are (to differing effects) intrinsic to a formal patterning which has been described by critics, and later by Walker herself, as a "quilt" pattern. This reflects Walker's own affirmation of, and interest in, the artistic and cultural heritage of black women, quilting having been one of the few genres of folk art available to black women in the South. (Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" deals with this heritage.) Quilts made by Southern black women, influenced by African textile aesthetics, were characterised by asymmetrical repetition of form, off-beat placement of pieces, variable colour schemes, and controlled sense of rhythmic movement. Christian observes that

Alice Walker's works are quilts--bits and pieces of used material rescued from oblivion for everyday use. She takes seemingly ragged edges and arranges them into works of functional though terrifying beauty. (Black Women Novelists 180)

She shows how Walker uses this pattern to make particular points:

It is as if Walker consciously selects all the nasty bits and pieces about black people that they as well as white people believe. Then she examines each bit, lucidly arranges the pieces so we might see the savage nibblings of everyday oppression at the souls of black Southerners. (184)<sup>1</sup>

In Grange Copeland, this "quilt" structure is evident in the succinct, episodic, at times non-chronological chapters of varied length, which cyclically juxtapose scene, incident, character, and in which flashback is used. Similarities and contrasts are simultaneously evoked, in, for example, the situations, behaviour, and relationships of different characters such as Brownfield and Grange, or Margaret, Mem and Josie.

This structure colours the quest motif in Grange Copeland. Although the title of the novel, with its explicit metaphor of rebirth (Third Life), suggests that the quest is limited to the title character, there are, as I have already indicated, other quests in the novel. These quests, or elements thereof, are structured into the novel in looping cycles which interrupt one another, or are interrupted by other "pieces" of the text which do not specifically relate to quest. The beginning or "separation" phase of Grange's quest (the only completed quest in the novel) is scarcely marked, before Grange's son Brownfield's quest begins, clearly and ominously sign-posted

---

1. For a more detailed discussion of how this "quilt" structure works in Grange Copeland, see Christian's Black Women Novelists (190) in which she analyses Part Five of the novel using this analogy.

by "a thousand birds ... wildly singing good luck" (24). Yet Brownfield's quest is doomed to total failure, as he sticks, in a quagmire of his own making, at the Dew Drop Inn, servicing Josie and Lorene. Grange returns, apparently changed (he now shows remorse for his earlier behaviour and tries to make amends to Brownfield), but the description of the "initiation" phase of his quest--his time in the North--is narrated in the novel long after the phase of "return." And although Grange Copeland's quest conforms broadly to Campbell's pattern, attention is paid mainly to the second and third phases. The "initiation" phase in Harlem is privileged with one of the longest sections in the novel; the incident with the white woman is described at length and in great detail. The last phase, Grange's "third" life, which is his "return," is picked up again in the last third of the novel and is a discursive description of Grange's relationship with his granddaughter Ruth, which looks towards Ruth's future.

These quests function in the novel to explicate one another, either through contrast or extension, and thus highlight the process of social change dramatised by the novel. The analysis of the social and psychological factors which differentiate them provides the underlying theme of the novel and the socio-political projects which it points towards. Walker describes the conditions which result in the destructiveness of Grange (in his first life) and Brownfield's behaviour. The narrative suggests that

the outcome of Grange's quest provides a more constructive response to these circumstances than the passive "blaming" of whites that is an unchanging feature of Brownfield's character. This outcome is the assumption of personal responsibility for one's own life and an attitude of overt resistance to the political structures of a racist society, as opposed to the acceptance of a cultural identity imposed by the ruling class in which is inscribed the role of victim. Yet even this is not enough to transform society, and Grange's own redemption is riddled with further contradictions--he buys his farm with Josie's money; the only way he can save Ruth is through the murder of Brownfield; and his own transformation is based on the "murder" of a white woman.

The quest pattern in Grange Copeland is informed by the metaphor of the journey (the structuring metaphor of the novel)--a metaphor which has deep roots in Afro-American history and culture, and which is repeated in different ways in Meridian and The Color Purple. Susan Willis has noted the historical resonances of the journey-motif in Afro-American literature and its implications for the development of identity:

Ever since Zora Neale Hurston hit the back roads in her chevvy, gathering up the folk tradition and defining herself in relation to that tradition and her project as a writer, journey has been central to black women writers. Even before Zora Neale, journey had given structure and pattern to the slave narratives, as escaped slaves recounted the transformation in both condition and consciousness that the journey produced in their



lives and then came to signify in their narrations. And, long before that, journey meant Middle Passage, the cataclysmic mediation between African tribal society and plantation slavery. Yet even here, even as journey led to the horrors of slavery, it also stirred the consciousness, propelling newly arrived Africans to ponder the radical discontinuity between their lives in Africa and their enslavement. This too can be seen in the few extant slave narratives produced by Africans. The journey into slavery, the journey into freedom, and finally the journey made by many contemporary black women writers--the journey back into history, reversing the migration of Afro-Americans from south to north--each of these journeys, no matter how arduous, has generated a growth in consciousness. Each of these journeys, no matter how perilous to the self, has provided a means for defining the self. (219-220)

Certainly the central journey in Grange Copeland refers to these previous journeys, as well as alluding to the journey which is the axis of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. It signifies also the journey from rural South to urban North made by countless numbers in the history of America. Indeed, this journey is implied in the opening pages of the novel, when Brownfield watches, with envy, his uncle, aunt, and cousins drive away from his house back to the North--a region imbued for Grange and his family, as for many others, with myth (3). The primary impulse for Grange's journey is a blind desire to escape the brutalising and dehumanising conditions under which he and his family live as black sharecroppers. These conditions are graphically described in the first few chapters of the novel, bearing vivid witness to Walker's desire that readers "see a little bit of Georgia from the early twenties through the sixties ..."

(qtd. in Tate 176). Here is one example of the conditions of Brownfield's childhood, its deprivations and malnutrition:

At first she [Margaret] left him home in a basket, with his sugartit pressed against his face. He sucked on it all day until it was nothing but a tasteless rag. Then, when he could walk, she left him on the porch steps. In moments of idle sitting he shared the steps with their lean mangy dog. And as the flies buzzed around the whiskered snout of the dog they buzzed around his face. No one was there to shoo them away, or to change the sodden rag that attracted them, and which he wore brownish and damp around his distended waist. For hours he was lost in a dull, weak stupor. His hunger made him move in a daze, his heavy eyes unnaturally bright. (6-7)

The first chapter establishes the sharecroppers' relationship with the white boss, a relationship characterised by fear and contempt on the part of the sharecroppers. It is portrayed through the eyes of the child Brownfield, who, with a child's perceptiveness, watches his father's response to Shipley, the boss:

For when the truck came his father's face froze into an unnaturally bland mask, curious and unsettling to see. It was as if his father became a stone or a robot. A grim stillness settled over his eyes and he became an object, a cipher, something that moved in tense jerks if it moved at all. (8)

And when Shipley speaks to Brownfield, Brownfield learns a lesson he never forgets, and repeats in his own relationships with bosses:

[O]ne of the workers--not his father who was standing beside him as if he didn't know he was

there--said to him softly, "Say 'Yessir' to Mr. Shipley," and Brownfield looked up before he said anything and scanned his father's face. The mask was as tight and still as if his father had coated himself with wax. And Brownfield smelled for the first time an odor of sweat, fear and something indefinite. (9)

The contrast of Grange's behaviour in front of Shipley here, with his later behaviour--his vociferously expressed hatred of whites, and his behaviour towards the white Civil Rights workers--is one of the signs of Grange's metamorphosis. The interaction between Grange and Shipley is a paradigm of the master-slave relationship, with its symbolically expressed power relations and collusions. Grange's taciturnity is described by Ensslen as "a symbolic gesture of non-cooperation and masked contempt of long standing in Afro-American literature (frequently to be met with in the fugitive slave narratives of the nineteenth century)" (194). This behaviour is surely part of what Michael Cooke calls "signifying," which he describes as "a form of meta-communication where the surface expression and the intrinsic position diverge.... In one dimension signifying might take the form of modes of speech and gesture that, while pleasing to the white power structure, carry an undertow of freedom and critical distance" (15). He goes on to remark that "an adaptive skill in misleading was an important basis of survival for blacks" (16).<sup>2</sup>

2. Cooke quotes a blues song which graphically illustrates this: "got one mind for white folks to see,/'nother for what I know is me;/he don't know, he don't know my mind" (16).

Grange is deeply affected, however, by having to assume a "mask." The paragraph which follows suggests, in the robot-like motion with which Grange drinks his liquor, "the movement of the bottle going up and down in his father's hand" (9), that Grange has become like a wax image, numbed to all feeling and initiative, or even response. And the section in Chapter One (11-13) which describes the pattern of his and Margaret's week indicates a rapidly increasing submission to their conditions which appears impossible to resist. In the first chapter, Margaret is described as having a skin that is "rich brown with a creamy reddish sheen;" "small and regular" teeth and a sweet breath (5). The second chapter shifts to five years later. After being left alone every weekend waiting for visitors who never come, while Grange goes into town, sees Josie, and gets drunk, Margaret has succumbed to her own need for solace. The narrator remarks that "[i]t seemed to Brownfield that one day she was as he had always known her; kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart's good times, in the transient embraces of strangers" (20). Brownfield has himself become hardened, hostile to his mother and aggressive to the new baby, product of one of Margaret's affairs with white men, and, in deference to Grange, ignored.

Grange initiates the quest pattern in the novel when he leaves this intolerable state of affairs and goes North,

to "the promised land" (Christian 185). In the novel the only person who is witness to Grange's leavetaking is Brownfield, who pretends to be asleep when Grange looks at him. Grange is unable, even at the last moment, to touch his son before he leaves. Margaret acknowledges Grange's absence with apparent resignation, but commits suicide soon thereafter:

"Well. He's gone," his mother said without anger at the end of the third week. But the following week she and her poisoned baby went out into the dark of the clearing and in the morning Brownfield found them there. She was curled up in a lonely sort of way, away from her child, as if she had spent the last moments on her knees. (21)

Brownfield's quest takes over at this juncture. It fails abysmally. Much of the novel is concerned with Brownfield's repetition--to a more extreme degree--of Grange's patterns of violence and self-destruction. The account of Brownfield's departure from the house, his journey and its interruption by his arrival at the Dew Drop Inn and all the events following, including his relationship with Josie and marriage with Mem, are the substance of Parts II and III. At the end of this tale of despair, violence, and misery, Grange Copeland returns. The next chapter, placed in the novel symbolically adjacent to the account of Grange's arrival, is the description of Ruth's birth, suggesting Grange's own rebirth and Ruth's significance for him. I will not discuss Grange's return for the present, however. Rather, in order to render my own account of

Grange's quest chronological, I will discuss its turning point--the complex incident concerning the "murder" which Grange commits in New York. For it is through this incident with a white woman that Grange becomes renewed.

#### Grange Goes North: Separation and Initiation

He was, perhaps, no longer regarded as merely a "thing"; what was even more cruel to him was that to the people he met and passed daily he was not even in existence! The South had made him miserable, with nerve endings raw from continual surveillance from contemptuous eyes, but they knew he was there. Their very disdain proved it. The North put him in solitary confinement where he had to manufacture his own hostile stares in order to see himself. For why were they pretending he was not there? Each day he had to say his name to himself over and over again to shut out the silence. (144-145)

W.E.B. Du Bois writes, in Souls of Black Folk:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (qtd. in Johnson 214)

In New York, ironically, Grange is forced, in order to gain even the alienated "double consciousness," to generate in his imagination the hostile gaze of white society. Fanon says of the objectification that he experienced as a black

person in the colonial world: "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects" (109). Grange's experience is similar, but perhaps worse. He is totally ignored; he is not even granted the validity of <sup>being</sup> an object.

One evening in Central Park he has an experience in which this sense of being refused existence by people around him comes to a head. The narrator tells us matter-of-factly: "He had killed a woman with child on a day when he was in excruciating pain from hunger" (145). This incident has highly contradictory effects on Grange Copeland. The central one is that although the woman he encounters is white, she is pregnant. So while she calls up for him the feelings of hostility he generally feels for whites, her pregnancy evokes other, more ambivalent feelings. He is drawn to her, her pregnancy reminding him of Margaret and her own pregnancies. Yet there is a bitterness in the memories, engendered, no doubt, by the recollection of Margaret's second child--the child of one of her white lovers:

He was fascinated by pregnancy, and this woman's big belly brought forth a mixture of sweet and painful recollections. The creative process was tremendous, he thought. A miracle. But when he thought of Margaret's belly, bitter grimaces forced themselves to his lips. (146)

The poignant scene that Grange witnesses between the woman and a young soldier evokes his sympathies in spite of his hostility towards whites. It appears to Grange that the young soldier, who has made the woman pregnant, has informed her, after giving her a ring, that he is leaving her. Grange, watching, is filled with concern for the young woman in her plight, his concern based on an impulse of common humanity transcending race: "It was the first honestly human episode he had witnessed between white folks, when they were not putting on airs to misinform the help. His heart ached with pity for the young woman as well as for the soldier, whose face, those last seconds, had not been without its own misery" (147). She, however, after apparently giving in to despair, and at the very moment when Grange is spontaneously considering offering her help, apparently withdraws into an "impenetrability, into a sanctuary from further pain...." This seems to him "pathetic" and "peculiarly white American;" and indicates her lack of human sympathy (148).

The woman gets up to leave and abandons the money that the soldier has given her. Grange uncharacteristically finds that he cannot bring himself to take the money that has been left. In addition, the emotional qualities of the scene have affected him so much that "he found himself unable simply to disappear" (149). Caught by a compulsion related possibly to the woman's pregnancy (guilt feelings about deserting Margaret, perhaps) but which is obscure to



him, Grange follows the woman and tries to return part of the money to her. She responds, not with thanks, but with the insults of a particularly virulent racism, kicking him. Even after he shakes her, she continues her insults, engendering in him a maddening re-experience of all his "old plantation frustrations." In an attempt to jump down to the grass from the platform where she is standing, she falls into the pond. Despite her representing everything he detests about white society ("He hated her entire race while she stood before him, pregnant, having learned nothing from her own pain, helpless except before someone more weak than herself, enjoying a revenge that severed all possible bonds of sympathy between them" (151)), Grange suddenly discovers that "to save and preserve life was an instinct, no matter whose life you were trying to save" (152). But the woman is too disgusted by his "race" to allow herself to be saved by him, and Grange chooses not to force her life upon her:

She reached up and out with a small white hand that grabbed his hand but let go when she felt it was his hand. Grange drew back his dirty brown hand and looked at it. The woman struggled to climb the bank against the ice, but the ice snagged her clothes, and she stuck in the deep sucking mud near the steep shore. When she had given him back his hand and he had looked at it thoughtfully, he turned away, gathering the scattered money in a hurry. Finally she sank. She called him "nigger" with her last disgusted breath. (152)

This is a socio-cultural situation in which "race" is one of the terms of the social identities within which human beings are constructed. These terms imply relative

positions of "superiority" and "inferiority," within a hierarchy of power, or even relative levels of humanness. Within this context, there is a crisis. Someone breaks the rules of the contract and acts in a way which is "essentially" human: tries to save the life of another human being. This human being responds by denying the humanness of the saver, and asserts the original dialectic-- in Hegelian terms, the master-slave relationship. The woman, in the process of dying, tries to assert a position of power over Grange; precisely that which Grange had hoped to escape when he left the South. Grange, in the past, has accepted his term in this contract. His attitude towards Shipley underscores this. But in this incident, in his understanding of it and in his subsequent behaviour, he begins to reject this subordinate position. When he realises that the woman has refused absolutely to see beyond his skin colour to his humanity he turns away in an act of passive witness to her death. He does not insist that she be saved by him.

In this reading, of course, we are accepting the "truth" of Grange's perception. An alternative reading could be that Grange respects a decision taken by the woman to die. In both interpretations, however, the master-slave dialectic is escaped by Grange. In the first: if the woman does not want to die, and he leaves her to her death, he is rejecting her attitude towards him. In the master-slave relationship, the slave must save the master, which he

refuses to do. On the other hand, if she does want to die, and he respects this, the attitude he shows her is that of one human being on an equal footing to another. In both cases, her death is symbolically the death of the master.

But there is a further level to the incident between Grange and the white woman. The fact that the other person here is a woman, a pregnant one at that (emphasising femaleness and fertility) introduces, quite apart from the ideas about race, a whole complex of meanings to do with gender. I have already noted <sup>the</sup> associations ~~with~~ Margaret that the sight of the woman's belly arouses in Grange, possibly calling up for him feelings of guilt about his treatment of her, but also evoking his anger at her infidelities with "the man ... who turned her husband to stone" (20), who presumably was the father of her child. In refusing to save the woman (killing her and denying the life of her child), he unconsciously re-enacts his relationship with Margaret, a relationship in which he quite brutally rejected her and refused to acknowledge her needs. Yet Grange is unable or unwilling to understand this dimension of the incident. (This is ultimately one of the failures of the male quest as Grange represents it.) Then, as a "white" woman, she is totally "opposite" to him as a "black" man. One might even say that the woman represents, for Grange, a projection of the Jungian anima archetype, the contrasexual element in the male psyche, in this case in its negative or destructive form. The impression that the

figure of the woman implies unconscious contents is reinforced by the fact that she sinks into the pond, in Jungian terms a symbolic descent into the unconscious. And lastly, in "killing" a pregnant woman, Grange symbolically kills her descendants--of which he is aware: "It was the taking of that white woman's life--and the denying of the life of her child ..." (153).

Grange leaves the woman, thinking that his abandonment of her to her fate in the pond constitutes murder. Significantly, he acknowledges his choice: "he faced his refusal to save her squarely," admitting, possibly for the first time, responsibility for his actions. He realises that he has made a conscious decision, which, in real terms "was simple murder" (153). Paradoxically, however, this murder does not arouse in him feelings of guilt or troubled conscience; in contrast, the reverse: "in a strange way, a bizarre way, it liberated him," rather as Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's Native Son feels liberated after he has killed the white heiress Mary Dalton. The way Grange makes sense of this response, that "[i]t was the taking of that white woman's life--and the denying of the life of her child--the taking of her life ... that forced him to want to try to live again," is that "the necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect," is to "kill their oppressors." A necessary corollary to this readiness to kill, Grange feels, is the readiness to part with one's own life--but

paradoxically, the consequence of this attitude is "the most passionate desire to live" (153).

Grange Copeland understands this incident on a literal, material level, and he goes out into Harlem, in exultation, passionately preaching a "new religion" of hate (153). But what has happened for Grange has been an inner, psychic transformation, and his act of "murder," although it has happened for him in literal terms with a real person, represents more deeply a symbolic construct. Fanon says that "[t]he first impulse of the black man is to say no to those who attempt to build a definition of him."<sup>3</sup> Grange's method of resisting definition as a sharecropper when confronted with the boss is to adopt a mask--the mask which hides his real feelings and attitudes. Here Grange sheds his mask in approaching and trying to save the woman. Even though she does not see that he has done this, he will not replace it. Fanon says: "I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an inborn complex, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known" (115). Grange has managed to reject the oppressor within him, which is what the white woman represents--that internalised image of white supremacy realised as self-hatred--and which Brownfield remains enthralled by until the end of his days.

---

3. The privileging of the male is a feature of the texts of Negritude and related discourses. "Woman" does not appear to exist as a subject in these discourses.

The aggression that Grange experiences ("like a tamed lion who at last tasted blood" (155)) after this crucial act can be seen as a flood of psychic energy resulting from the release of repression. His proselytising is also comprehensible in this light. Fanon comments that what psychotherapy ought to do for the black "man" is to "put him in a position to choose action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict--that is, towards the social structures" (100). Grange has moved in the direction of choosing action except that his assertions are displaced--albeit systematically. He fights individual white people indiscriminately rather than social or economic structures. Grange's constitution of a category of "white" people with homogenous characteristics (we have already seen how he calls the white woman "peculiarly white American" (148)) is obviously problematic. But although he realises that "he could not fight all the whites he met," this perception never really changes, in spite of Ruth opposing it later. And rather than the discovery of the unproductiveness of his arbitrary attacks on white people leading to more useful political work (say), it leads him into withdrawal:

Each man would have to free himself, he thought, and the best way he could. For the time being, he would withdraw completely from them, find a sanctuary, make a life that need not acknowledge them, and be always prepared, with his life, to defend it, to protect it, to keep it from whites, inviolate. (155)

That Grange withdraws is not really surprising. As in the unfinished novel by the black South African writer and clinical psychologist N.C. Manganyi, Mashangu's Reverie, which also presents a symbolic murder, in Grange Copeland there is an exploration of (to use Cyril Couve's discussion) "Fanonian themes such as that of the acquisition of the mask or a false consciousness and that of the importance of violence in undoing the mask." Like Grange Copeland, the protagonist in Mashangu's Reverie murders, in fantasy, a white figure, a "symbolic murder [which] is at the same time a symbolic birth" (104). Couve observes that "[t]he black subject can only emerge through the symbolic murder of the white man who represents the internal mask which has held him captive for so long" (105). He criticises the ideological platform of this construct from a materialist perspective, which holds that the basis of this postulated, already constituted black subjectivity is an essentialism which is questionable. Couve suggests that this is one of the ideological shortcomings of the Black Consciousness movement, which, like its American counterpart, focusses on a universal "black essence" (92), set in opposition to an oppressive "white consciousness" (98).

According to Couve, what this reductionist polarisation leads to is a "denial of politics since it fails to take into account class divisions, divergences of interests, and a diversity of actions and goals guided by differing ideologies amongst blacks" (119). Grange's withdrawal is

indeed a denial of politics--both in itself and as an acknowledged pessimism about the possibilities of social change. An interesting comparison is provided by the career of Malcolm X, which followed a similar trajectory to Grange's in its early years. Malcolm X moved to New York and became a hustler. He was convicted of burglary and sentenced to ten years in the Massachusetts State Prison at Charlestown, where he educated himself and became "a self-made philosopher and prophet" (Wilmore 183), and later, "one of the great prophets of black liberation" (Wilmore, 186). Grange Copeland, however, actively withdraws from any community, and takes up an attitude of aloofness towards the world. It might be useful here to note Amilcar Cabral's ideas about this kind of subjectivism:

[Cabral] makes a distinction between a quest for personal identity that is subjectivist and politically sterile and a 'return to the source' that stimulates radical political action. (Jock McCulloch 59)

Grange Copeland returns to Baker County, and buys a farm where he can be "free." He tries to live out his new attitude of personal responsibility (and assuage his guilt) by helping Brownfield, Mem and their family, although this is not well received by Brownfield (another of the contradictions which mars Grange's return), and, of course, devoting himself to Ruth. The central contradiction in Grange's "third life" is that although his devotion to Ruth and his determination to make up thereby for past mistakes



are unequivocal, the site of this relationship is the only one in which he acts out or lives out his changes, and the community as a whole is rejected. On the other hand, Grange's rebirth does have an important result in the quest-trajectory that the three novels propose, although it is possibly in a wider sense, in Cabral's terms, politically impotent. This is to prepare the ground for the female quest with its more encompassing aims, foreshadowed in this novel in the character of Ruth.

#### Grange's Return

The placement of Ruth's birth in the text right next to the description of Grange's arrival stresses the symbolic value of his rebirth, which marks the beginning of his "third life," and is also a signal of Ruth's importance as a character. Christian remarks: "Ruth, who is the focus of the second half of the book, is born at the same time in the midst of degeneration and regeneration" (Black Women Novelists 199). Grange and Ruth are to have a close and special relationship, characterised by a tenderness and fierce protectiveness on the part of Grange, and equally a tenderness combined with quizzical, affectionate scepticism on Ruth's side: "A new pattern evolves as Grange, the impotent, rejecting father, becomes an involved, caring human being, and as the young child Ruth both seeks her

identity through her elder and yet helps him understand his own life" (Christian, Black Women Novelists 200).

Christian's analysis of this section of the novel--Part Seven to Part Eleven--is sensitive and thoroughgoing, and I will not treat the section in detail here. There are, however, problems in this idyll of ambrosia-making, tale-telling and companionship which Christian does not discuss.

The central problem, as I suggest above, is that Grange does not live out his personal changes within a community except to a limited degree in relation to Ruth. He consciously remains aloof from the community: in disagreement with the neighbour in Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," he says to Ruth "Good fences don't make neighbours" (173). Grange, moreover, is seen as odd by the community, and Ruth also becomes singled out because of her relationship with Grange. People visit them, "ill-at-ease ... out of curiosity" (198). This attitude towards them is exacerbated by Josie, who out of jealousy hints at dark indecencies: "She just had no idea what really went on down there between them, Josie was heard to say" (189).

Furthermore, the relationship between Grange and Ruth is, as a grandparent-child relationship, a special kind of relationship which cannot function as an emblem for the varied and multi-faceted relationships of a community. As Ensslen remarks:

In Ruth's burgeoning expectations the tentatively reconstructed black family would of course call for complementation of the precarious partnership

of grandfather and granddaughter by a new relationship of black men and women in general. How this new black family based on new black men and women might become reintegrated into the culture and community of the black group, remains elusive in Alice Walker's first novel.... (215)

It is, however, clear that Grange himself cannot really be integrated into the existing social relations, nor can he change them. His exploitative relationship with Josie and his unsuccessful one with Brownfield (he cannot prevent the murder of Mem, and can only protect Ruth from Brownfield by killing him) underline this. Ensslen remarks that

Grange's individual strength and improved self-image is largely unconnected to any collective culture or experience, neither deriving from them its sustenance nor flowing back into them as a reinvigorating force. Grange is always shown in terms of an individual consciousness struggling for self-assertion, never as part of a community of people with common aspirations. (196-7)

His change is never explicitly, in narrative terms, linked with change in the community. As a character, he functions as an emblem of social change--the representative of a collective--but he is not portrayed as a character who invokes the values of community as Meridian or Celie do--rather, the reverse. Grange's major and most successful contribution to change is in his relationship with Ruth. Ruth is a different kind of woman from the other female characters in the book--largely because of Grange. It will be interesting at this point to examine why there is no female quest in the novel--and why it appears (if one may

speculate beyond the ontology of the novel) as though Ruth "will" quest and that her quest is "likely to be" successful.

### Ruth: Hope for the Future

The women in Grange Copeland are unable to quest because they are too damaged by their circumstances to do so. In Walker's terms, they are "suspended women," like many of the characters in the stories from In Love and Trouble, such as Rannie Toomer, Maggie, and Roselily. There are no options in their lives other than marriage and hard physical labour. And marriage means battering--physical, sexual and emotional--by men who have no other way of expressing their masculinity. As Christian observes: "Because they believe in the definition of women dictated by society, neither Margaret nor Mem are emotionally prepared to understand, far less cope with, their reality" (188). For both women, and particularly for Mem who has received an education and knows a less brutalising existence than Margaret has ever experienced, there are glimmerings of the possibilities of resistance to the beatings that they receive in their lives. Yet on the whole they are too locked into a passive acceptance of their "roles" as women to be able to change. When Mem challenges Brownfield with a gun (92-97) she makes a supreme effort to force him to

accept a move into town and a marked improvement in circumstances--but she cannot keep this up under the onslaught brought to bear on her by Brownfield: "She was ill; the two pregnancies he forced on her in the new house, although they did not bear live fruit, almost completely destroyed what was left of her health" (104).

Unlike Celie, these women have no community of supportive women who can help them, nor any guides or role-models for different behaviour. They appear to be extremely isolated, bound only to their husbands and their nuclear families. Even Josie, "the most complex female character of the novel" (Ensslen 199), who has a greater degree of economic independence than Margaret or Mem, and who is tougher and spunkier, is herself bound to the discriminatory norms of a patriarchal culture. As a prostitute, she is dependent on the men she serves for her income--and she has become a prostitute precisely because there is no alternative for her as a young woman who has been "spoiled" early and raped thereafter repeatedly. She has been ruined by the double standard of patriarchy which requires sexual experience and sexual aggression in men as proof of masculinity, yet demands chastity in women to protect the male line.

Thus any kind of transformative journey for these women is an impossibility. For Ruth, however, things are different. They are different in many ways. On the most fundamental level, after Mem dies, she receives from Grange

the nurturing and care that she needs for growth in both physical and emotional terms. He teaches her, moreover, a tough scepticism and resilience that will stand her in good stead. Grange takes his responsibility towards her very seriously, and in some ways, the most important goal of Grange's quest is the preparation of Ruth for her quest. He feels that "[h]is one duty in the world was to prepare Ruth for some great and herculean task, some magnificent and deadly struggle, some harsh and foreboding reality" (198). After Brownfield begins to threaten to force Ruth to go back to him, Grange is careful to provide financially for her future, and to make her as self-sufficient as possible by teaching her to drive, making her drive into town on her own. But he wants more than survival for Ruth:

And still, in all her living there must be joy, laughter, contentment in being a woman; someday there must be happiness in enjoying a man, and children. Each day must be spent, in a sense, apart from any other; on each day there would be sun and cheerfulness or rain and sorrow or quiet contemplation of life. Each day must be past, present and future, with dancing and wine-making and drinking and as few regrets as possible. Her future must be the day she lived in. These were the thoughts he thought, sitting before the fire, pulling on his pipe, or hunched up on his bed clipping his toenails. Survival was not everything. He had survived. But to survive whole was what he wanted for Ruth. (214)

And, in a sense, Grange's own "wholeness" is only possible if Ruth becomes "whole." For he has failed with Mem and Brownfield, and also, although he perhaps does not realise this, with Josie. But Ruth does grow into an

independent, clear-sighted young woman who will not accept everything Grange teaches her without question. It is clear that she will not remain isolated on Grange's farm-- she will go out into the world on her own journey of discovery. When Grange tells her, after she meets the Civil Rights workers, one of whom she is sexually attracted to, that another one without a wife will come by one day, Ruth says impatiently: "'I don't expect a whole stream of 'em to come passing by here ... I think I'm going to have to go out an' find the one I want'" (242). One of the things Brownfield finds irritating about Ruth is that "[s]he still ran toward something" (226). Unlike Mem, who was, in Brownfield's eyes, "without a sky" (59), Ruth has one, the sky bequeathed her by Grange, when she sat "atop the truck" and could see for "miles and miles across fields and forests" (125).

The novel suggests that it is Ruth's quest-in-potential, in some ways the most important "quest" in the novel, which, although not actualised in this text, will in the end be more all-encompassing than Grange's. It will not be predicated upon an experience of hatred and choice of violence as Grange's was. Ruth refuses to dismiss all whites: "I mean, what I want to know, is did anybody ever try to find out if they's real people" (182). She is determinedly logical when Grange tries to get her to hate whites for killing her mother. "The white folks didn't kill my mother," she says when he tells her how much the

"white folks" can be hated. "He [Brownfield] did!" (143). Hatred is the basis of Grange's morality, and to him, essential for survival--but it will not be the same for Ruth. Indeed, none of the women in this novel use hatred in their defence. Ruth will be the first (thanks to Grange) who is not destroyed--who can stand up for herself--and yet not hate. Then, unlike Grange's, her quest will be specifically and consciously political. She is drawn to the Civil Rights marchers and optimistic about the possibilities for change: "'I think I believe like the students,' Ruth declared. 'Ain't nothing wrong with trying to change crackers'" (233).

As a character Ruth carries enormous weight--it is she who carries out the changes begun by Grange, she who will live out a different kind of life with different kinds of choices, she who will, in Washington's words, become "the natural inheritor of the changes in the new order, thus marking the transition of the women in her family from death to life" (23). She is the only female in the novel who could be called an "emergent woman," although, as I have said, we see only her potential in this regard. Her quest, to be taken up and carried through in the novel Meridian, will be a female quest, the first in the three novels. The limitations of the male quest can and will only be overcome by women-in-quest, prefigured by Ruth, and demonstrated in the later novels by Meridian, Celie, Nettie and others.



I believe that what is suggested by the play of quests in these novels is that the male quest is in certain fundamental ways a failure. The major achievement of Grange Copeland's quest is a step that, in the trajectory of quest proposed by the three novels, is an essential historical movement for black people in the United States, and particularly in the South. Yet its central engagement is with issues primarily of race, not gender as well. Grange does not come to understand his own role as an oppressor, even though he becomes a more loving human being, conscious that he was wrong in "beating [Ruth's] grandma" (195). The masculinist model of what it means to be human cannot, in patriarchy, overcome the sexist power relations constructed through the terms of gender. Further, even though Grange learns to refuse the role of victim, he cannot see beyond the question of "race" to the humanity of white people, which Ruth is able to do. And lastly, as we have seen, Grange's quest is to a large extent a quest for individual change which does not involve the community.

Thus it is not enough, in Alice Walker's terms, for wholeness, which is both explicitly and implicitly the goal of the quest in each of the novels ("But to survive whole is what he wanted for Ruth" (214)). A greater degree of wholeness is achieved by Walker's female questers, rather than by the males, and real potential for change in society at a deep level comes only with the female quest. On the one hand, the quest in these novels increasingly involves the

community. This suggests a political project which invokes much more than individual self-realisation; which sees individual change in terms of social change. In Meridian, individual change generates social change; and in The Color Purple social and personal change takes place through community. As we shall see, in The Color Purple this involvement of the community in the quest becomes its most important feature. Moreover, the spiritual dimension as an aspect of existence not to be divorced from the social sphere becomes more important in these novels. It is central in Meridian, in which the link between the social and the spiritual is seen as essential for change in society, and it is intrinsic to Celie's development in The Color Purple. I go on now to examine the female quest in Meridian.

## CHAPTER THREE

The Female Quest in Meridian: A Quest for Vision

Meridian charts the journey of a young black American woman, Meridian Hill, towards the attainment of an identity that explodes the stereotypes which dehumanise black women and with which the American patriarchal culture controls black women. For Meridian, this identity primarily incorporates the ability to act and to take personal risks in the face of powerfully hostile forces. It embraces the ability to love and to forgive (as foreshadowed by Ruth), and asserts a deep sense of connection with the spiritual, social and cultural heritage of black people in America. It affirms community--in this case most importantly the community of the rural South, yet by implication a wider community. Marriage or sexual love is not essential to this identity. Friendship is more important. In the course of the novel Meridian becomes an individual who has consciously attempted to discover who she is; what her traditions are and what they represent to her; how she can connect with them and with her community in her own life; and what action she can take to fight oppression in its many forms. Yet she is still a person in the process of growth. As Bonnie Hoover Braendlin suggests, Meridian is an existential hero, an outsider, a complex, contradictory

person shaped by radically contradictory forces ("Bildung" 84). At the end of the novel she is renewed, but she does not emerge from her chrysalis/sleeping-bag as a fully self-realised, totally integrated human being whose development is complete. And, although at the end of her quest she is able to "return to the world" (Meridian 227), it is not clear what that world will be. She will still, as a black woman, be in some ways eccentric to the dominant culture of America. There is an open-endedness to Meridian's quest, as there is in many twentieth-century fictional female quests (Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, for example), for the society to which their protagonists return is yet oppressive to black women (and white women too). The closure which completes the quest in The Color Purple is not evident in Meridian.

Although Meridian's quest is that of a solitary hero, community is all-important in her quest. In this, as in other ways, her quest is more encompassing than Grange Copeland's. Rachel Blau DuPlessis states that Walker "creates a pluralist spiritual and political vision for her single, questing protagonist, Meridian Hill.... So Meridian is, in fact, a collective biography of a multiple individual, who articulates social and spiritual questions" (Writing 158). Although DuPlessis' perspective has validity, I am not going to analyse Meridian's quest primarily in these terms, which seems to me to apply more strongly to The Color Purple than to Meridian. I agree

with DuPlessis that Meridian emerges from and is defined by "multiple women" (Writing 158), yet in terms of the development of a quest motif through the three novels, Meridian's quest is powerfully characterised by her singleness. And although Meridian herself discovers and asserts the value of community, she never becomes satisfactorily integrated into a community as Celie does.

Barbara Christian has said that "[a] recurrent motif in Walker's work is her insistence on probing the relationship between struggle and change" ("The Black Woman Artist" 457). This exploration is central in Meridian. A crucial aspect of this struggle, according to Walker, is the necessity to confront and challenge socially engendered--and gendered--roles, attitudes and behaviour in a patriarchal society which forces women, especially black women, into positions of subservience, and imposes on them stultifying social images. One very important element in this struggle is the confrontation with motherhood in general and with the myth of black motherhood as it exists in America. Christian has discussed this theme in Meridian in her article "An Angle of Seeing," in which she analyses the contradictions inherent in this complex:

Afro-American motherhood is also a battleground for racist and sexist ideology and exists within the context of the prevailing view of motherhood in the U.S. Hence three points of view--the Afro-American community's view of motherhood, the white American view of motherhood, and the white American view of black motherhood--intersect to produce a distinctly complex ideology of Afro-American motherhood. (219)

As a novel of female quest, Meridian is 'a narrative which incorporates both spiritual and social quests. In my view the novel challenges the notion that these two are separate and by so doing questions the binary world-view predominant in Western culture. As a social quest the novel grapples with specific social and political issues: the concrete and demanding questions, for example, of revolutionary violence, of precisely what form political action should take both in times of crisis and times of relative stability, and of the meaning of commitment to political and social action. In Meridian the connection of the quest to political structures and issues is overt. The individual stands for the collective and her historical basis is in community. For Walker, defining the self on an individual level means defining it in terms of a collective history and connecting with that history as a source of nourishment. Thadious M. Davis says:

In Meridian, Walker's second novel, the heroine divests herself of immediate blood relations--her child and her parents--in order to align herself completely with the larger racial and social generations of blacks. Meridian Hill insists that although seemingly alone in the world, she has created a fusion with her generation of activist blacks and older generations of oppressed blacks. ("Celebration" 49)

As spiritual quest the theme of psychic death and rebirth is central in Meridian. Here the rebirth pattern of the quest is similar to the cyclical pattern described by Pratt in her chapter "Novels of Rebirth and Transformation"

in Archetypal Patterns, with the difference that Meridian is young rather than middle-aged, as the heroes of the novels which Pratt discusses appear to be. And as spiritual quest it incorporates specific nodes of spiritual or mystical experience which emerge at points in the novel from a substratum of spirituality underlying the narrative. This is derived from Native American traditions (what Walker refers to as "the whole sublayer of Indian consciousness" in the novel (qtd. in Tate 178)), as well as from Meridian's Afro-American heritage. Faith Pullin suggests that the mystical element in Meridian is superimposed, thus artificial (199). I do not share this view. The psychic journey that Meridian undertakes and the mystical experiences it involves provide for her something extremely important: a sense of continuity with the "ground of being" as discussed by Christ in Diving Deep, as well as with her indigenous traditions. This feeling of continuity is crucial to her as a basis firstly, for discovering within herself the strength she needs for her grass-roots political work, and secondly for her position in the community as prophet and teacher: someone who has faced the possibility of death and come through it, who can and will take risks with her own life in fighting for herself and for her people. The self-confrontation that Meridian's inner journey involves and the mystical experiences that provide nodal points within it are, Walker's text suggests, prerequisite to a true political commitment which operates

from a platform of fundamental self-knowledge and integrity rather than from more superficial, ego-orientated motives represented by characters like Anne-Marion and Truman.

Davis goes on to say:

[T]he novel creates a new basis for defining Meridian's self and for accepting responsibility for one's actions. In fact, the controlling metaphor is death and rebirth, an acting out of the renewal impossible for Brownfield. By the end of the novel, Meridian's personal identity has become a collective identity.... In spite of her painful private experiences, Meridian is born anew into a pluralistic cultural self, a "we" that is and must be self-less and without ordinary prerequisites for personal identity. (49)

The characters who do not undergo the same psychic struggle as Meridian does are portrayed as irrelevant to political change. Although Truman appears finally as having the potential to undergo the harsh initiation Meridian has suffered, he is nonetheless portrayed in the course of the narrative principally as an individual whose political beliefs rely more on the trends than principles. The questions Meridian insistently faces are "academic" (191) for him. He dismisses the Civil Rights struggle, saying that "[r]evolution was a theme of the sixties" (192), and withdraws to produce bourgeois art, using the images from his own culture and selling them, rather like Dee in Walker's short story "Everyday Use" from the collection In Love and Trouble, who sees the butter churn and quilt in her mother's house as objets d'art rather than as functional. Anne-Marion, who was harshly judgmental towards Meridian



when she was unable to promise that she would "kill for the Revolution" (14), ends up "writing poetry about the quality of light that fell across the lake she owned" (205). Of course she has already expressed this sign of her superficial attitude towards political change in her ideas about capitalism: "Anne-Marion wanted blacks to have the same opportunity to make as much money as the richest white people." She comments to Meridian: "since I haven't had a chance to have a capitalist fling yet, the practice of those [socialist] theories will have to wait awhile" (116).

Pratt has suggested that for women the quest is often cyclical in form rather than linear (Archetypal Patterns 169); the circular structure of Meridian bears this out. The ending takes us back to the beginning, then a little further on. Within that circularity, which is repeated with various strands in the novel such as Meridian's relationship with her mother, or the debate about revolutionary violence, the text-time shifts quite radically, using analepsis through memory. We are given glimpses of Meridian's childhood and of her mother's and grandmother's pasts. Linear, step-by-step development is conspicuously absent. Walker herself in an interview with Claudia Tate refers to Meridian as "a crazy-quilt story" which she describes as "one that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth" (Walker, qtd. in Tate 176).

Nonetheless, the novel incorporates most of the phases discussed by Pratt in her schema of the female quest, and I use this schema to analyse Meridian. There are overlaps between certain phases, and in one instance I merge two of them. Although the stages do not appear in the novel in chronological sequence, for the sake of simplicity I treat them chronologically.

In the interview mentioned above Walker goes on to say that a crazy-quilt story "is generally much more evocative of metaphor and symbolism than a novel that is chronological in structure ..." (176). I hope to do justice to the richness of metaphor and symbolism in Meridian.

#### Splitting off from family, husbands, lovers.

This first aspect of the interior journey takes the form of an acute consciousness of dissatisfaction with the roles and norms typically assumed by the persona and of a consequent turning away from society. (Pratt, "Surfacing" 142)

For Meridian, the young black woman protagonist, finding herself at seventeen in a dull marriage, and with a baby she cannot unequivocally love, the "dissatisfaction with the roles and norms" offered women in her society is clear, although initially it manifests as a non-specific lethargy. Her discontent, submerged in the unconscious, presents itself in her conscious awareness in terms only of vague frustrations and yearnings. And her first decisive

actions towards change appear almost involuntary, as though she is impelled by some force incomprehensible to her. Certainly in this period of her life--adolescence and early adulthood--she appears almost to be sleepwalking. As a teenager she becomes involved in sexual activity with boys apparently fortuitously. She does not enjoy it and she has no sense of the possibility of pregnancy. Meridian's mother, the "spotless" Mrs Hill (DuPlessis, Writing 158) is no help to her--the only information or advice Mrs Hill imparts is the puzzlingly euphemistic exhortation to "'be sweet'" (53). Barbara Smith echoes the attitudes expressed here in the Introduction to her anthology Home Girls:

It seems so terrifying to me to talk about these issues coming from a home and culture where sexual matters of any kind were seldom discussed, at least across the generations. Black women have traditionally been reluctant to talk about sex with their daughters. "Keep your dress down and your drawers up," is a homily of this reticence. At the very same time, all Black women have been viewed as sexual animals by the society as a whole and at times by black men as well. (xlv)

Meridian, victim of these contradictory attitudes, drifts into pregnancy. Like Marguerite, the hero of Maya Angelou's autobiographical I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Meridian is stunned and disbelieving. Yet, notwithstanding her dismay, Meridian's emotions at this time seem characterised mainly by detachment. Her primary motivation in having a lover at all has been one of self-protection from the sexual advances of other males who, in the language of possession prevalent in a Western patriarchal culture,

see a woman as "'So-an-so's Girl'" (55) as soon as a sexual relationship with one particular male has been established.

Once pregnant, Meridian goes through the motions of what society appears to expect of her as a "nice," yet slightly "tarnished," black girl. She marries Eddie, her adolescent sweetheart and the father of her child. Eddie is a black version of the All-American Boy. He plays basketball, approximates a crew-cut and is fastidious about his jeans. Yet even her moments of pleasure with him seem diffuse:

When she was not nauseous or throwing up, they laughed a lot, though there was a dizziness about it for her, the laughter seemed muted, as if she did it underwater, and the echo of it whirled sluggishly through her head. (56)

Sex with Eddie continues to be something endured rather than enjoyed. Meridian's awareness of her pregnancy is "blurred," and she finds herself wondering who Eddie is, "[w]hat he was doing there in bed with her" (56). She cannot identify with his enthusiastic upwardly mobile aspirations for a smart house and cannot project for herself a future with him. After Meridian has the child a new set of emotions overwhelm her--anger and ambivalence. Her rage at her entrapment expresses itself in dreams and fantasies of violence. Adrienne Rich has written cogently on this phenomenon in Of Woman Born:

The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens.... [T]he woman with children is

prey to ... complicated, subversive feelings. Love and anger can exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not "loving"; grief at all we cannot do in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration. (35-36)

Noting the manifestation of this ambivalence in black women's fiction, Susan Willis suggests that "[t]he connection of desire and hatred is a contradiction generated by the male domination of heterosexual relationships" (230), and that "children ... are the living embodiments of the contradictions that have shaped their mother's life possibilities and sexuality." She states:

Nowhere is this more clear than when Meridian, caressing and marvelling upon her dear black baby, fantasizes scratching and tearing his flesh with her fingernails. The love and hate are one, just as her desire for his future is one with the recognition that in this society he is but one more black body for the labour pool. (231)

The weight of Meridian's ambivalence causes her to deflect her anger onto herself and she has fantasies of suicide: "The thought of murdering her own child eventually frightened her. To suppress it she conceived, quite consciously, methods of killing herself" (63). These fantasies signal an irruption from the unconscious. They mark the beginning of the process which leads to her leaving her home town and embarking on her quest journey. So although she continues to live "in her usual fog of

unconcern" (65), her dissatisfaction with her life intensifies.

Initially this surfaces in apparently trivial areas, and is projected outside of herself, primarily onto Eddie. She begins to criticise his personal habits, and becomes aware that Eddie is caught in a perpetual boyhood. In becoming conscious of the disjunction between herself and the female stereotypes presented by pulp magazines, she realises that "her marriage [is] breaking up" (65). She feels no impulse, however, to keep it together. The turning point in her consciousness arrives when she becomes aware of the student Civil Rights activists in a nearby house. Two features strike her about this situation: (a) that black and white students are working together; and (b) that the women are not, at least one respect, conventionally "feminine"--they wear dungarees. When the house is bombed, Meridian suddenly realises that something very important is happening in her world: something of which she has heretofore been entirely unaware. She has a dream about Indians. The text implies that this dream is prophetic for her. It suggests both the nature of the struggle (against oppression) that she is about to enter, as well as its historical roots: "And so it was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world" (67).

In the period following this realisation, Meridian finds herself regularly entering a state of meditation, as

she sits looking out at the back yard, which is "usually green" (69), suggesting that the process which is beginning is regenerative in nature. In so doing Meridian is preparing herself psychically for action by drawing within herself as it were, opening herself to some of the unconscious processes taking place within her.

(Appropriately, then, the next chapter takes us to Meridian's mother and therefore the immediate roots of Meridian's own past.) At the same time, in these meditative moments, Meridian watches the pubescent young girls passing her window. Suddenly aware of the power of the socially produced fantasies in terms of which these young girls live their lives--the fabric of illusion woven from images of movie idols, the ideology of romance presented by the cinema--Meridian recognises her own former participation in those fantasies and realises her own disillusion. No longer can she live "in the dream of happy endings: of women who had everything, of men who ran the world.... She was still only seventeen. A drop-out from high school, a deserted wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law" (70). This catalogue of "failure" provides an ironic counterpoint--as does Meridian's whole life--to the labels attached to the mummified Marilene O'Shay, the grotesque caricature of "femininity" in the first chapter, who, supposedly, was an "'Obedient Daughter'", a "'Devoted Wife'", and an "'Adoring Mother'" (5).

A month later Meridian finds herself at the door of the student activists' house, volunteering to work for them. This propels her into a sudden and sharp process of politicisation and activism, followed by the news of her scholarship to Saxon College, which will force her, if she takes it up, to leave her child. Christian notes that in the U.S., "motherhood is the prescribed role for women ... but this prescription is not so much ritualised as it is enforced by the limited social options available to women ("An Angle" 231). Meridian's options up to now have been limited to Eddie and Eddie Jr. and the possibility of "a house like Mr. Yateson's" (57). Now she is offered another option and she grasps the opportunity. But by so doing she brings herself into direct confrontation with her mother and all the social pressures that this confrontation implies: the force in general brought to bear in patriarchal society on women who do not conform to its dictates regarding motherhood and femininity as well as the weight of the myth of black motherhood in the U.S. These social pressures are given voice by Mrs Hill, who very directly states that women like Meridian, in the eyes of society, are grotesque and unnatural: "'You should want Eddie Jr.'", said Mrs Hill. "Unless you're some kind of monster. And no daughter of mine is a monster, surely'" (85).

In the face of this moral authority Meridian takes the decision to leave Eddie Jr. and go to Saxon--the first time in her life she has consciously decided something on her own



account. Yet although this represents for her an enormous step in her own self-realisation, the psychic consequences she sets in motion are crushing. Guilt begins to overwhelm her, appearing in her dreams. Although consciously she feels that she has made the right decision, she has "[n]ightmares of the child, Rundi, calling to her, crying, suffering unbearable deprivations because she was not there" (87). Her guilt is intensified when she is reminded of the sacrifices for their children made by black women in slavery, and her own mother's sacrifices: "She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member" (87-88). Christian remarks of this chapter:

What Walker does in "Battle Fatigue" is to present in a succinct way the essence of Afro-American motherhood as it has been passed on. At the center of this construct is a truth that mothers during slavery did not have their natural right to their children and did everything, including giving up their lives, to save them. From this truth, however, a moral dictum has developed, a moral voice that demands that Afro-American mothers, whatever the changed circumstances of their lives, take on the sole responsibility of children.

("An Angle" 238-39)

The irony, of course, is that, lacking a supportive community, Meridian is unable to think of herself as anything other than alone in her plight--whereas her predicament as a mother is shared by countless women. If

socio-sexual arrangements were differently structured Meridian might have been able to take her child with her to college. She is, however, victim of a system in which women are on the whole the primary caretakers of children, and strongly penalised if they refuse to fulfil this prescribed role. Christian remarks on the contradictions in a society in which motherhood is honoured as "a pure sanctified state," while at the same time, individual mothers are punished "for being mothers." She goes on "[a]nd in relation to Afro-American mothers, the society neither cherishes nor respects her offspring; in fact, white society clearly does not value black children" ("An Angle" 221).

Despite her guilt which causes her intense suffering later, Meridian leaves for Saxon College, this move representing the first stage in her quest. In leaving her home town she clearly, though not perhaps consciously, rejects the repressive social norms under which she has grown up, and the ideology of romance which affirms them; and sets out on the journey which will take her to a new awareness of herself and her community. Although the elitist Saxon College itself serves to affirm rather than challenge dominant social structures, it is here that Meridian develops relationships that will be important for her quest and here that she undergoes her experience of rebirth, centrally including an inner confrontation with her mother, and which provides her with a basis for a new

spiritual strength and conviction. And at Saxon Meridian comes into contact with her "green-world guide" the magnificent, sheltering magnolia tree called The Sojourner, which over-arches the novel like a benign spirit.

While at Saxon Meridian takes her decision to go back South and do grass-roots political work in the small towns and rural areas. This decision in a sense represents a continuation of the first phase of the quest, the "splitting-off" or separation phase begun when she went to Saxon, yet it is also a return to community. In the South Meridian is a solitary figure without family and personal friends, yet on a deeper level the South is her spiritual home, and the work she does here represents a concrete acting out of the values she has been in the process of discovering. This work is for her real "revolutionary" work--the teaching, canvassing, and the direct, immediate emotional connections she makes with ordinary people, which provide some of the most vivid vignettes of Southern black rural culture in the novel. At the same time, while in the South Meridian clearly and consciously divests herself of the accoutrements of possession and personality, until finally she lives in a bare cell like a monk, supported only by the community for whom she works.

Green-world guide/green-world lover

In Annis Pratt's schema phases two and three are both associated with what she calls the "green world" or the world of nature, marked by its "persistent recurrence in women's fiction" (17).<sup>1</sup> She associates both phases with the youthful "naturistic epiphany" which, she suggests "the mature woman hero tends to look back to ... as touchstones in a quest for her lost selfhood ..." (Archetypal Patterns 17). Many feminist theorists (Simone de Beauvoir, Sherry Ortner, Janet Sayers among others) have noted that the identification of women with nature (and men with culture) has historically been linked, in Western culture, with a normative biological determinism which prescribes roles for women and also devalues them. Hélène Cixous' exposition of what Moi calls "patriarchal binary thought" (104) dramatises the oppositions in the patriarchal value system in which women are identified with the negative, "feminine" side. Meridian, however, rejects a biological determinism in which women's primary function is motherhood, although Christian suggests that the novel also proposes "motherhood" as a state of mind not necessarily proceeding from biological motherhood, in which the "insight into the preciousness, the value of life" is important as "the cornerstone of the value

1. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin suggests that many contemporary feminist bildungsromane are not characterised by "naturistic epiphany." According to Braendlin, "[i]n the secular view any healing, restorative bond with nature remains an impossibility for twentieth-century woman, herself more a product of the freeways than of the fields" ("Alther, Atwood" 21).

of freedom" ("An Angle" 247).<sup>2</sup> The world of nature as green-world, however, does play an important role in Meridian, as it does in a related novel of female quest: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, in which the central symbol is a pear tree.

Two major symbols with which Meridian is connected are associated with nature: the Sacred Serpent and The Sojourner (although they both have strong cultural meanings as well). She is associated with nature in other ways, for example, she decorates her room at Saxon with "large photographs of trees and rocks and tall hills and floating clouds, which she claimed she knew" (27). Moreover, when Medgar Evers is assassinated, Meridian "had planted a wild sweet shrub bush among the plants in the formal garden in front of the honors house" (22).

Pratt defines the green-world guide or token in terms of "naturistic moments which help fictional heroes aspire to a different realm of being from the ordinary" ("Surfacing" 143). Often the guide is "some ordinary phenomenon that suddenly takes on extraordinary portent" (Archetypal Patterns 139). The green-world lover, which according to Pratt may be "an ideal figure or a revery one ... appears as an initiatory guide and often aids at difficult points in the quest." In some modern novels, however, she suggests that "the figure represents a combination of the Native

---

2. This could, of course, be seen as a false "essentialism." A detailed analysis of these issues, however, is outside the scope of this study.

American animal guide, or spirit, and an incorporation into the personality of one's sexual and natural forces, one's Pan, as it were, or one's internal Adonis" (140). It is in these terms that I see The Sacred Serpent as representing both green-world guide and green-world lover. That the figure of Meridian's great-grandmother, Feather Mae, symbol both of Meridian's maternal ancestors and unrepressed female sexuality, is associated with the burial mound heightens its functions as guide. The Sojourner is also a green-world guide, yet its connotations are more extensive than those suggested by Pratt. It derives its meanings from Meridian's social and cultural heritage as a black woman as well as from the green world, thus The Sojourner gathers up these meanings as well as its spiritual connotations. An image which adumbrates The Sojourner is the magnolia tree under which Meridian, as a child, buries the mysterious gold bar. Something else of great value is buried under The Sojourner--the tongue of Louvinie.

#### The Sacred Serpent.

As a sacred burial mound the Sacred Serpent has links with the world of the dead, metaphorically the underworld. In Native American culture the serpent is the mediator between human beings and the lower world, as well as connoting magic and wisdom (J.C. Cooper). Merlin Stone notes the uses of the snake bite as an hallucinogenic agent

in the initiation rituals of Native Americans in the South-West U.S., designed to engender mystical insight and clairvoyance (212-13). Furthermore, Stone points out the connection of the serpent with oracular revelation and early goddess-centred religions. She states that "the Serpent appears to have been primarily revered as a female in the Near and Middle East and generally linked to wisdom and prophetic counsel rather than fertility and growth" (199). These resonances connect the Native American traditions beloved by Meridian's father, the legacy of spirituality left by Meridian's black foremothers (symbolised by Feather Mae), and even older specifically female traditions. The maternal legacy represented by Feather Mae is discussed by Walker in her collection In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, most notably in the title essay and in an essay called "Gifts of Power." In the first essay, Walker talks about the spirituality of black women in the past:

When the poet Jean Toomer walked through the South in the early twenties, he discovered a curious thing: black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held.  
(231-2)

And in "Gifts of Power" Walker describes Rebecca Jackson, a black woman who, in the early nineteenth century, became drawn to religious work through a series of visionary experiences. In seeking out Feather Mae's experience in the Sacred Serpent, Meridian is searching for her own links with these visionary, spiritual women of her past.

In contrast to Meridian's thorny relationship with her mother, her relationship with her father is one of empathy and sharing. Like Grange for Ruth, Meridian's father is the one person from whom she receives nurturing in her childhood. (Christian observes, however, that although Meridian has a loving relationship with her father, in the rest of the novel he "barely seems to touch her life" and even in this scene, he is impotent, for "the government moves the Indian off the land and turns it into an amusement park" (235).) Meridian's father grows vegetables "along the biggest coil of the Sacred Serpent." She frequently goes with him to the Sacred Serpent, where the vegetables grow in the soil enriched by "iron and calcium" (46) from the bones of dead Indians. The impression of the land is one of immense fertility, this context of richness implying the nature of the experiences of those who descend into the pit:

It was beautiful land made more impressive by the five-hundred-yard Sacred Serpent that formed a curving, twisting hill beyond the corn. The garden itself was in rich, flat land that fitted into the curves of the Sacred Serpent like the waves of the ocean fit the shore. Across from the Serpent and the garden was a slow-moving creek that was brown and sluggish and thick, like a stream of liquid snuff. (48)

Meridian has heard the story of Feather Mae: that as a young woman she was in the habit of sitting "on the Serpent's back, while she sucked on a weed stem" (49). One day Feather Mae spontaneously follows some squirrels down



into the Serpent's coil, and is suddenly overtaken by a powerful sensation:

When she stood in the centre of the pit, with the sun blazing down directly over her, something extraordinary happened to her. She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air. The green walls began to spin, and her feeling rose to such a high pitch the next thing she knew she was getting up off the ground. She knew she had fainted but she felt neither weakened nor ill. She felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication. Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled. (50)

The significances here are many. Firstly, Feather Mae descends into the pit, a symbolic descent into the unconscious. This descent has links with myths which involve female figures descending into an underworld, namely the Demeter/Persephone myth (this myth is often related to the mother-daughter relationship in women's writing), the myth of Psyche, and the Sumerian Inanna/Dumuzi myth, which Sylvia Brinton Perera describes thus: "Inanna's path and its stages may [thus] represent a paradigm for the life-enhancing descent into the abyss of the dark goddess and out again" (13). These myths are specifically female myths which symbolize a process of uniting the conscious and unconscious; of reaching into "the affect-laden, magic dimension and archaic depths that are embodied, ecstatic and transformative ..." (Perera 14). Standing in the centre of the pit, Feather Mae has the sun directly overhead; thus heaven, the sun, is symbolically connected to the underworld. Descending into the underworld, which Inanna,

Persephone and Psyche do, implies death. The Sacred Serpent, a burial mound, is literally a world of the dead. Feather Mae faints--a death of consciousness--and when she comes round, she feels "renewed" (49). What she appears to undergo is a transformation of consciousness. At the same time, this transformation has concomitants of powerful physical sensation: "Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled" (50). Afterwards, far from withdrawing into an ascetic saintliness, Feather Mae espouses physical ecstasy as the basis of religion. Perera says: "[The] deepest descents lead to radical reorganisation and transformation of the conscious personality" (Perera, 50).

Meridian seeks to understand "her great-grandmother's ecstasy and her father's compassion for people dead centuries before he was born...." She watches her father descend into the pit, and "return to his cornfield with his whole frame radiating brightness like the space around a flame" (50). She herself goes down into the pit, and has an experience very similar to Feather Mae's, although described in the text in more detail. The walls of the pit spin and she is drawn into a spinning motion, experiencing a kaleidoscopic sensation of flying and merging with a whole set of images: images from nature and of various aspects of her life. Her experience, like Feather Mae's, is one of a kind of death: she feels that she has left her body--and when she returns to consciousness, she is in the centre of

the pit looking "directly into the sun" (51), again an image of the connection of heaven and earth, or the upper and the lower worlds. Meridian's experience in the pit and her great-grandmother's are narrated in the same register and tense, and are close together in the text. This indicates the congruence of the two experiences, thus the continuity of experience for black women that Walker stresses in the novel. Meridian is actively interested in the visionary heritage left her by her great-grandmother and she consciously follows in Feather Mae's footsteps.

Afterwards she discusses the meaning of the experience with her father. Significantly their perceptions of it differ. For her father, it is a way of freeing the spirit from the body. For Meridian, it is a way to "expand the consciousness of being alive" (51). In this she is much closer to Feather Mae than her father. Her idea is one which seeks the unity of body and spirit--to break down the divisions of "patriarchal binary thought," whereas her father's seeks to separate them--a reinforcement of the dualisms of western culture. Their common experience, however, provides the basis for a strong sense of sharing, both in the experience itself and its meaning: "Their secret: that they both shared the peculiar madness of her great-grandmother. It sent them brooding at times over the meaning of this. At other times they rejoiced over so tangible a connection with the past" (51).

This experience, so meaningful for Meridian as a young girl, is one which she seeks to repeat later. She visits an ancient altar on a mountain in Mexico, where she undergoes a similar experience. Like a priestess, she walks up the steps to the altar, where she enters another world: "her face would disappear into the clouds," and again she experiences the rushing, spinning sensation, becoming one with the surroundings. Emerging from the experience, she feels attuned to the natural world: "When she stepped upon the earth again it would be to feel the bottoms of her feet curl over the grass, as if her feet were those of a leopard or a bear, with curving claws and bare rough pads made sensitive by long use" (51). Like the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, Meridian, in merging with nature, becomes powerfully sensitised. These experiences, in the pit and at the altar in Mexico, reinforce the image of Meridian as a visionary and a prophetic figure. She seeks spiritual experience and although the forces of secularism and oppression would destroy her, she is able to open herself to levels of consciousness which enable her to discover a strength within herself enough to resist these forces.

The Sojourner.

The Sojourner, as a magnolia tree, is a symbol of the history of the South--Billie Holiday's song, "Strange Fruit"

refers to the fact that lynched black people in the South were hanged from its branches. With its wide, sheltering branches and flowers, the image of The Sojourner metaphorically overarches the novel and gathers to itself many levels of symbolism. It is an image of suffering and of endurance. Meridian's response to The Sojourner is intense:

This tree filled her with the same sense of minuteness and hugeness, of past and present, of sorrow and ecstasy that she had known at the Sacred Serpent. It gave her a profound sense of peace (which was only possible when she could feel invisible) to know slaves had found shelter in its branches. When her spirits were low, as they were often enough in that first year, she would sit underneath The Sojourner and draw comfort from her age, her endurance, the stories the years told of her, and her enormous size. When she sat beneath The Sojourner, she knew she was not alone. (89)

Here, for Meridian, the tree represents wholeness: wholeness in the union of opposites it suggests for her. The Sojourner represents too the positive aspect of her slave history. The figure of Louvinie, the slave who had her tongue cut out for telling such a terrifying tale to the plantation owner's son that he died of fright, suggests Meridian's connection not only with her forebears in slavery, but also in Africa, male and female. The legend of Louvinie, moreover, is a powerful testimony to the rage of black women against their white oppressors, and the consequences of expressing that rage: their mutilation and silencing. It is a symbol of voice; an emblem of the creativity of black women, and of the oral traditions passed

on from African culture. The Sojourner, then, as Margaret Homans observes, stands for self-expression, and also, through the legend of Fast Mary, "for the possibility of students identifying with one another as women" (194). In legend, the tree has magical qualities, and this affirms its function as a guide for Meridian:

Other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision. Once in its branches, a hiding slave could not be seen. (34)

Then, the name of the tree also calls to mind Sojourner Truth and a whole tradition of black women involved in political struggle. Sojourner Truth in this context is legendary, and her speech at the Women's Rights Convention in Ohio in 1851 gathers together many elements of the legend:

I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Davis, Women, Race & Class 61)

Sojourner Truth represents for Meridian a political guide or model. She was an ex-slave who became an itinerant preacher/abolitionist and women's rights campaigner. In 1843, says Gerda Lerner, she "left the city on foot, leaving all her possessions behind her, lodging where she could find

hospitality and preaching her unique gospel" (370). It would not be far-fetched to suggest that Meridian, in her way, does the same. She leaves her home, and after studying at Saxon, goes back to the South, divests herself of possessions, and dedicates herself to political work. That Meridian is aware of the tradition embodied by Truth is apparent when, while musing on her idea of white women, comparing them with black, she thinks: "[i]t thrilled her to think she belonged to the people who produced Harriet Tubman, the only American woman who'd led troops in battle" (106). Thus The Sojourner re-awakens in Meridian the awareness of her heritage; the awareness which impelled her down into the pit of the Sacred Serpent's coil. It also renews in her the possibilities of consciousness that she experienced in the pit. The fierceness with which she tries to defend The Sojourner against attack by the Saxon students bears witness to this.

The Sojourner gets cut down in an act of blind, self-destructive frenzy by the Saxon students on the occasion of Wild Child's burial, when they have been refused the use of the chapel by the college guards, on orders from the college President. This act results from the impotence experienced by the Saxon students in the face of the college authorities, who represent the repressive social order. The refusal of the authorities to allow them admission to the chapel results in the Saxon students rioting "on Saxon Campus for the first time in its long, placid, impeccable

history" (38), but because they feel that they cannot effectively challenge the forces of authority they turn on The Sojourner instead. Meridian begs them to destroy the president's house, the real symbol of patriarchy, but to no avail, and "in a 'fury of confusion and frustration they worked all night, and chopped and sawed down, level to the ground, that mighty, ancient sheltering music tree" (38). The irony here is the implied collusion of women in patriarchy with their own oppression--even in this situation in which they are united as women. Margaret Homans, discussing Meridian in terms of women's relationship to language, remarks that in this scene, "[t]he tongue, first an emblem of silencing by white, patriarchal power, becomes a figure for making black women's voices heard that is in turn silenced, this time not forcibly by whites but by the black women themselves" (194).<sup>3</sup>

Meridian herself does not escape from the self-destruction arising from an impotent rage. Her enraged hiss to the harshly arrogant doctor who offers to tie her tubes after an abortion, to "Burn 'em out by the roots for all I care" (112) is a distortion of her real anger at an impervious, brutally misogynist world--an anger which becomes self-directed because its real target appears invincible. But The Sojourner, unlike the shrub bush which Meridian has planted and a "jealous gardener" (22) has

3. Homan's discussion of Meridian in terms of the ambivalent place of women writers within patriarchy, especially from marginalised or oppressed groups, is illuminating.



slowly destroyed, does not die, and at the end of the novel Meridian receives a photograph from Anne-Marion of the stump of The Sojourner with a tiny branch growing from its side, a symbol of the renewal engendered by Meridian's quest.

Confrontation with parental figures/

Plunge into the unconscious

In women's rebirth fiction this confrontation [with parental figures] most often takes place with memory figures rather than with actual persons.... It is ... a key phase if the hero is to complete the full plunge to the nadir of her unconscious, and frequently becomes an agon or terminal struggle if unsuccessful.

(Patt, "Surfacing" 143)

The confrontation with parental figures--in Meridian the mother--is central to the novel. It is through this struggle that the themes of guilt and atonement, of the myth of black motherhood and the reality of the spiritual legacy of black women, and the effects of these on Meridian, are reflected. Through her exploration of this issue Walker scrutinises the contradictions for black women of their legacy: on the one hand, the positive, enabling visions of survival, endurance and strength bequeathed by black women not only under slavery but throughout the course of their history in America; and on the other hand, the crippling effect of these same visions if they become idealised or too rigidly applied in situations when different responses are

needed, or co-opted into damaging social stereotypes by the dominant culture.

The mother-daughter relationship in patriarchy is <sup>with difficulty and conflict.</sup> fraught. In a recent set of papers entitled Living with the Sphinx: Papers from the Women's Therapy Centre, edited by Sheila Ernst and Marie Maguire, Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum note that "[f]eminist scholarship in psychoanalysis ... has shed light on the structure of this relationship and it details the immense impact that the mother-daughter relationship has on feminine psychology" (57). These papers describe some of the work--both practical (in therapy) and theoretical--that is being and has been done on this issue. Sheila Ernst draws from her work as a therapist to demonstrate "the difficulties [in patriarchal society] that girls have in establishing their psychological separateness ... in a culture in which only certain aspects of their femaleness are recognised" (69). She argues that, in the mother-daughter relationship, because the mother herself is emotionally deprived and ambivalent about being a woman, she is unable to reflect adequately her daughter's reality: "The infant girl expressing her needs comes to represent the repressed part of the mother. The mother, reminded of feelings she cannot tolerate in herself, unconsciously pushes the girl away" (92). The daughter then represses and splits off parts of herself, with the consequence that she lacks a sense of

identity or self. Orbach and Eichenbaum in their paper contend that in the mother-daughter relationship,

the mother, who has been raised as a woman herself, is the child's most consistent and visible representative of the feminine. Who she is, how she is, how she feels about herself and what she projects about herself, powerfully inform the daughter's emotional and physical experiences of femininity and of mothering. ("Separation" 57)

They describe some of the dynamics in the mother-daughter relationship which thwart "the daughter's development towards differentiation and autonomy" (60), dynamics arising out of the mother's own unmet needs which are projected onto the daughter. They show how this relationship perpetuates women's social subordination, remarking that "[i]t is an ironic and cruel phenomenon of patriarchy that the already oppressed shall prepare the succeeding generation for a similar fate" (59).

Some of the dynamics described in these two papers are clearly present in Meridian's relationship with her mother. One of the earliest indications in the novel of the centrality, yet also the difficulty, of this relationship appears in the first chapter, "The Last Return". In this chapter, there is an analeptic shift from the first part of the chapter where Truman meets Meridian in the southern town to New York, ten years earlier, where Meridian, in a group of students, is being asked to state whether she will "kill for the Revolution" (14). She is propelled by this question into a memory of the southern church of her

childhood. (Apart from the relationship with her mother, this memory initiates other strands in the novel, including the meaning for Meridian of her religious heritage, and her relationship with her father.) The memory is one of abandonment by her mother. In the memory, Meridian is in church with her mother, listening to the music and feeling that she can "hear" (14) the souls of the singers:

[S]he remembered her mother and the day she lost her. She was thirteen, sitting next to her mother in church, drunk as usual with the wonderful music, the voices themselves almost making the words meaningless.... (15)

*While Meridian is*

1 Intensely involved in the music, her feelings of love for her people, and her father's voice among the singers, her mother breaks rudely in upon her consciousness, exhorting Meridian to accept Christ. Mrs Hill's religion is a conventionally Judeo-Christian one of dogma and authority. Meridian is unable to respond the way her mother wishes her to:

But she had sat mute, watching her friends walking past her bench, accepting Christ, acknowledging God as their Master, Jesus their Savior, and her heart fluttered like that of a small bird about to be stoned. (16)

Meridian responds more readily to her father's religious sensibilities, which are attuned, in general, to a non-authoritarian "spiritual" consciousness, and in particular to the heritage of the Native Americans. Moreover, Mrs Hill's demand represents a condition. She

will only love Meridian if Meridian conforms to her expectations. Clearly, she refuses to accept Meridian for herself. The condition is impossible for Meridian to fulfil. Yet at the same time Meridian feels that the loss of her mother's love would be catastrophic; that to be cut off from her mother's love would mean being cut off from her own roots: "it is death not to love one's mother" (17). Consequently, because she cannot accept her mother's conditions, Meridian risks her loss. And her mother does withdraw: "But her mother moved away, tears of anger and sadness coursing down her face. Her mother's love was gone, withdrawn, and there were conditions to be met before it would be returned" (17). Before she can achieve any real sense of self, Meridian will have to come to terms with this abandonment by her mother and find another source of sustenance within herself.

Meridian's mother, Mrs Hill, is herself damaged by the situation in western patriarchy that "[a] woman's psychology is defined to a very large extent by her designated social role as mother" (Orbach and Eichenbaum, "Separation" 52); as well as, in particular, the ideology of black motherhood. She takes up the idea of survival and endurance which is at the heart of this ideology in a way which denies her own individual needs. According to the narrator, she was a woman who should never have had children:

She was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband. Her

spirit was of such fragility that the slightest impact on it caused a shattering beyond restoration. (39)

Yet Mrs Hill's own mother has literally killed herself with the hard work of putting her daughter through school in circumstances of intense poverty: "She [Mrs Hill] had bought her mother a coat and a new pair of shoes with her first pay. Hers had also been the honor, a short time later, of paying for her mother's pink coffin" (122). Mrs Hill's father, although prosperous and handsome, "had no desire to raise children ... and beat his wife and children with more pleasure than he beat his mules" (122). Mrs Hill tells Meridian that the only thing that kept her going in her childhood was her desire to become a school-teacher--and her mother, like the mothers in Walker's poem "Women," (Revolutionary Petunias) would do anything to provide her with an education:

How they knew what we  
Must know  
Without knowing a page  
Of it  
Themselves. (5)

Mrs Hill becomes educated, and knows "the joy of earning money as a schoolteacher," and "the freedom of thinking out the possibilities of her life" (39), which, however, are not extensive--teaching at home or teaching elsewhere. Not surprisingly, she becomes frustrated and wishes for "more of life to happen to her" (39). Not having the support of society for what she is doing, she

begins to doubt her own decisions and to project onto marriage the possibilities that her own life has not seemed to produce. Finally she succumbs to the social pressures she has internalised, and marries, which for her is pleasant enough until children arrive. She now understands, horrified, that "her personal life was over" and that the "mysterious inner life" (40) which she has imagined is enjoyed by the married women around her is nothing but spiritual death: that in bearing and bringing up so many children they are "being buried alive, walled away from [their] own life, brick by brick" (41). Her anger and her frustrated creativity--for she is one of those frustrated artists *whom* Walker refers to in the essay "Our Mother's Gardens"--are revealed in the making of bizarre, useless paper flowers and ludicrously small prayer pillows. She cannot openly express her anger, but she irons it into her children's clothes: "In their stiff, almost inflexible garments, they were enclosed in the starch of her anger, and had to keep their distance to avoid providing the soggy wrinkles of contact that would cause her distress" (73). Meridian grows up feeling responsible for her mother's pain: "When her mother talked about her childhood, Meridian wept and clung to her hands, wishing with all her heart she had not been born to this already overburdened woman" (123).

It is clear that Mrs Hill resents the children she has had to bring up yet because of the example set by her mother feels guilty herself about this. She represses her anger

and projects it onto Meridian, thus creating in Meridian a sense of guilt. She even suggests to Meridian as a child, that Meridian is, somehow, inexplicably guilty:

Meridian was conscious always of a feeling of guilt, even as a child. Yet she did not know of what she might be guilty. When she tried to express her feelings to her mother, her mother would only ask: "Have you stolen anything?" (39)

This question subtly implies some kind of obscure failure on Meridian's part, but clearly Mrs Hill is here expressing, albeit highly indirectly, her own resentment towards Meridian for being born, her own conflictual feelings about being a mother. Meridian has to deal with contradictory messages from her mother: on the one hand, that she is not really wanted, is in her mother's way, and is responsible for her mother's frustration and stunted creativity. This is a message which is certain to damage Meridian's own sense of self-worth, but it is also a more general message about having children. On the other hand, she communicates both subtly, by precept, and overtly, with words, that the only worthwhile thing for Meridian to do, as a woman, is to sacrifice her life for her children. Orbach and Eichenbaum state: "Most commonly, mothering includes a mixture of contradictory conscious and unconscious stances which express a playing out of the various possibilitites in relation to women's social subordination" ("Separation" 59).



Meridian rebels against this pressure, and gives up her child to go to college. We have already seen the guilt which this engenders. This guilt is insistent and weighty, and it is compounded by two other incidents: firstly, the death of Wild Child, the young vagrant girl whom Meridian tries to help, and secondly, her own abortion. It is clear that Meridian's interest in, and attempt to save, Wild Child, is, among other things, an act of atonement for leaving Eddie Jr. Meridian is deeply affected by Wild Child. After seeing her, she withdraws, becoming apparently comatose for a day. Unfortunately this withdrawal backfires, Wild Child escapes and, heavily pregnant, is killed. We have seen that the outcome of the attempt to hold a funeral for her in the College chapel is the destruction of The Sojourner. Then, after a single sexual encounter with Truman, Meridian falls pregnant; and undergoes the harrowing experience of abortion at the hands of the brutally unsympathetic campus doctor. Meridian's failure as a mother in social terms is total. She has now been involved, more or less directly, in the loss and/or death of four children or potential children: Eddie Jr. and Wild Child, then Wild Child's unborn child as well as her own. That socially repressive forces rather than she herself as an individual are responsible for these losses is beside the point: she takes the burden of guilt upon herself. This compounded weight of guilt (plus, I would suggest, the stress of political activism in the highly

charged period of the sixties, which Walker herself has noted (Tate 179-180)), cause her to fall victim to a mysterious, wasting disease.

Paradoxically, however, it is this disease which becomes the axis of her renewal: the experience of rebirth in which the central experience is the confrontation, on the level of the unconscious, with her mother. After her abortion, Meridian begins to behave in consciously self-destructive ways: "She just began to take chances with her life.... She began to forget to eat" (115). She begins to experience perceptual alterations, seeing things "bathed in a bluish light" (116), then to have fainting spells and to experience paralysis. Along with the paralysis, however, she experiences ecstasy--an ecstasy strongly reminiscent of mystical experience. Deborah McDowell refers to Evelyn Underhill's description of mystical ecstasy to explain Meridian's coma. In Underhill's description, the mystic undergoes a death-like trance lasting for hours or several days, during which "breathing and circulation are depressed. The body is more or less cold and rigid ..."(Underhill, qtd. in McDowell 270). Meridian finds herself losing her appetite and withdrawing gradually more and more from the physical universe. Yet this for her is a wholly satisfactory condition:

...she felt as if a warm, strong light bore her up and that she was a beloved part of the universe; that she was innocent even as the rocks are innocent, and unpolluted as the first waters.  
(117)

And when Anne-Marion glances at her one day, she is astonished to notice that around Meridian's head there is a soft, halo-like glow. (Meridian's father ascended from the pit of the Sacred Serpent "radiating brightness" (50).)

Here, Meridian's entry into her unconscious becomes an occasion for her to return to her personal past, in particular to her fraught relationship with her mother, and through this, to her own and her mother's history. She confronts her psychological and cultural heritage as carried by her black foremothers. The entry of Miss Winter at this point is significant. Miss Winter comes from Meridian's home town, representing thus a link with home. As a teacher, an older woman, she is a mother-figure for Meridian. Although appearing meticulously ladylike, she insists, in her music classes, on teaching jazz, spirituals and the blues. This decisively links her with the black cultural traditions of the South. It is her intervention which provides the catalyst for Meridian to become renewed. This catalyst is forgiveness. In this passage, Miss Winter remembers an oratorical competition at Meridian's high school. Here she witnessed Meridian's public breakdown in the process of giving a speech in praise of "The American Way of Life" (119). Meridian's mother was punitively self-righteous in this situation, and Miss Winter's memory reminds us of Meridian's experience of her mother as unwilling to accept her, and at the same time, as huge and powerful, with convictions impossible for Meridian to match.

This, of course, is the image Meridian has to abandon in order to come to her own sense of selfhood.

Miss Winter overcame her characteristic aloofness in this incident at the school, and offered Meridian the reassurance which her mother had refused her for her "failure" at public speaking. This was an act which brought her a surprising sense of well-being. Her presence as benign for Meridian is established in her memory of this incident.

The narrative shifts to Meridian's consciousness. Meridian thinks of her female ancestors on her mother's side. One of them, as a slave, suffered severe hardships in order to keep her children from being sold away from her. Another, as an artist, "famous for painting decorations on barns" (121) (possibly in the tradition of house-decoration derived from African culture), was clearly one of the women of remarkable creativity whom Walker praises in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." She was a woman who was not subjugated to her husband, in fact with her art she "bought not only her own freedom, but that of her husband and children as well" (121). Then Meridian remembers her grandmother, who, like her ancestor in slavery, virtually worked herself to death for her children.

These memories surface while Meridian lies, semi-conscious, in a trance state. There are two crucial moments in this process. The first is embedded in the sentence: "It never occurred to her that her mother's and

her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice." The following sentence, "None of these thoughts could she convey to Miss Winter" (123), indicates that this has been an insight on Meridian's part--and one which is extremely important to her, in that she realises that in different social conditions, different behaviour might be appropriate. The second moment occurs soon after this, as Meridian lies, waking then sleeping, watched by Miss Winter. She has a dream which pictorialises Mrs Hill's anger and the sense of threat this has incurred in Meridian:

When she slept she dreamed she was on a ship with her mother, and her mother was holding her over the railing about to drop her into the sea. Danger was all around and her mother refused to let her go. (123)

The crucial shift occurs when Meridian, in the dream, makes the request to her mother to release her: "'Mama, I love you. Let me go'". Her request acknowledges the lack of separation between them; that Meridian, in never having been fully accepted and "reflected back" by her mother, has remained unindividuated, bonded to her. Meridian sees, in the dream, that she has been trapped by her mother's own anger and frustration. Miss Winter hears her words, bends over her and whispers "'I forgive you'" (123). This act of forgiveness is deeply redemptive. It allows Meridian to forgive herself, to accept all the aspects of herself. She becomes released from the inappropriate pressures and

unconscious conflicts of the past while acknowledging the real value of the heritage bequeathed by black women in slavery. From the next morning she begins to recover her strength. She sits up in bed and eats breakfast. The exoneration by Miss Winter anticipates the several forgivenesses which occur later in the novel. From that time on Meridian is presented as a spiritual guide and leader in the small Southern communities in which she chooses to live. The following chapter presents Truman and Lynne, Meridian not appearing again until three chapters later, which seems to be some years after her time at Saxon College.

### Conclusion

The section of the novel called "Truman Held" focusses mainly on Truman and Lynne: their relationship and its breakdown, as well as on issues such as the question of the rape of white women by black men. It explores perspectives other than Meridian's, suggesting the validity of dimensions existing in relation to her, yet also in their own right. This emphasises the sense in the novel which, as we have seen, DuPlessis highlights: that of the multiple individual (158). In the earlier chapters Truman, Lynne and their relationship are seen only with an external perspective, from Meridian's point of view. Here an internal view of

their relationship is presented, from both Lynne's and Truman's points of view. The incident with Tommy Odds is also presented from the perspectives of both participants: Tommy Odds's as well as Lynne's. This inclusiveness in perspective serves, by creating the sense of intimacy with the characters in the reader, to introduce a sense of forgiveness for the limitations of the characters while not excusing them for their shortcomings or acts of violence.

This element of forgiveness is strong in the chapters called "Two Women" and "Lynne." With their emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness, they anticipate the final section. In these chapters, the theme of friendship, rather than the relationship of the heterosexual couple, is presented as one of the goals of the quest. In "Two Women," Meridian discovers a new kind of love for Truman, a love which is non-possessive, non-sexual, and deeply forgiving. Moreover, the antagonism of rivalry between Lynne and Meridian (felt mainly at this point by Lynne) is subsumed by their common grief over the death of the child, Camara, and their willingness to forgive and care for each other in terms which acknowledge their differences while accepting them. Although the aspect of lived continuity in friendship is not emphasised here, what is evoked is the sense of the importance of forging deep and long-lasting alliances between people. This theme is renewed in the last section both in terms of the development of the

relationship between Truman and Meridian as well as (briefly) in terms of Truman and Lynne's relationship.

The chapters in the section entitled "Ending" pick up on all of the important strands begun in the first section of the novel, and thus provide a vision of the goal(s) of Meridian's quest and the direction it opens up for others. The outcome of her quest is not without contradictions. The position of the black woman in American culture is still fraught<sup>with problems.</sup> Yet the sense that a path has been opened up for others to follow is clear. Meridian will "return to the world cleansed of sickness" (227). Truman will take up her struggle. Walker remarks that "Truman will certainly have to assume his [struggle] because his life has been so full of ambivalence, hypocrisy and obliviousness of his action and their consequences" (qtd. in Tate 180).

I consider the following issues as some of the manifestations of an attainment of identity which is the primary goal of Meridian's quest. Firstly, there are the specifically political issues, articulated in the chapter "Questions", in which the conversation between Truman and Meridian links up with Meridian's conversation in New York about the question of revolutionary violence. Connected with this, in "Questions," in the first chapter, "The Last Return," and in "Treasure" and "Travels," are Meridian's symbolic acts of heroism as well as her day-to-day canvassing which comprise her form of political activism. The chapter "Camara" relates to the spiritual quest and



represents a further resolution for Meridian in which she begins to articulate for herself a connection between religion and revolution. "Pilgrimage" presents an image of what Meridian could have been in terms of the mother-child relationship, and, arising from her painful understanding of this, her impassioned articulation of her task and its possibilities. "Settling Accounts" and "Release" affirm the themes of renewal.

In "Questions," Meridian has attained a degree of conscious self-acceptance which is not apparent in the earlier conversation in New York. She is now able to articulate and live with her own contradictions. Although she still cannot say unequivocally that she could kill in a revolutionary situation, she is clear that this question is one which is impossible to answer in the abstract. She is able, moreover, to make a distinction between what is morally "right" which is "never to kill," and that which is politically "correct," that is, "to kill when killing is necessary" (193). She has a clear sense of her own commitment to grassroots political activism and what this means. Her idea of teaching, for example, is community-based and rejects the traditional authoritarian model:

"I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don't see it as a handing down of answers. So much of what passes for teaching is merely a pointing out of what items to want."  
(192)

Truman dismisses her ideas. Clearly, he is able to think only in terms of intellectual fashions, and has himself, in making a statue for the Bicentennial, sold out to the bourgeoisie. The difference between them is succinctly expressed in the following sentences: "She could not help struggling with these questions. Just as Truman could not help thinking such struggle useless" (193). Truman will survive at any cost to his integrity. Meridian will survive with her integrity intact, yet she will be nearly destroyed in the process.

The section of "Questions," following the one discussed above, is the one in which Meridian, in an act expressing the outrage of the community which the community itself cannot articulate, takes the drowned child's body to the mayor's office. This act is symbolically connected with those in "Treasure" and "Travels," in which Meridian, through acts of compassionate insight, enables people themselves to begin to take responsibility for their lives through making use of the vote. The incident in the first chapter with the children and Marilene O'Shay is of this nature as well. In these situations Meridian is, at some risk to herself, providing an example to people who think of themselves as helpless. The step towards political consciousness that they take in voting is perhaps a small one, yet it is a beginning which they were formerly unable to make. Meridian's ability to communicate to people their own possibilities without imposing her own values is an

extremely valuable one. If these passages are contrasted with one earlier in the novel (97-98), in which Meridian describes to Truman Lynne's behaviour on a canvassing expedition, this ability is highlighted. The documentary realism of these passages, moreover, is not accidental:

They first saw the home of Miss Margaret Treasure through a landscape of smoke, while walking down a flat dirt road looking for people the census takers always missed. It was the middle of summer, hot as an oven, and sweat fell from their skin and evaporated before it hit the ground. On both sides of the road last year's cornstalks rustled in dry, lonely talk, and as the chimneys of the house wavered through the haze they saw a large black woman in a tight red dress hobbling toward them, a gasoline can in her hand. She was setting fire to the field. (211)

Walker is paying homage here to rural Southern black culture in much the same way that Hurston does in Their Eyes Were Watching God, a novel whose influence Walker has acknowledged. ( "There is no book more important to me than this one," she says in "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" 86.) The value Walker places on this culture is strongly suggested by the title of the chapter "Treasure," and it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that the "treasure" of the gold bar that Meridian finds at age seven is also (among other things) the "treasure" to be found among these impoverished and down-trodden people.

In the chapter "Camara" Meridian discovers this selfsame "treasure" in the church she visits in the summer of 1968, one of several she visits over a period of a few weeks. Here the "treasure" is the "inimitable soul" (202)

she hears in the music in the church, the same deep sweetness to which she responded so intensely in the church of her youth. In this chapter the spiritual and social quests converge, and Meridian realises and deeply acknowledges her relationship with the community. This church is very different from the churches of Meridian's youth in many ways. Physically it is different: it is not "shabby or small," but is "[a]n imposing structure." At the same time, it is not grandiose, but "settle[s] firmly on the ground" (197). While presenting an image of self-confidence, it is associated with the earth and a solid materiality. Furthermore, what happens inside the church is new to Meridian. She "had always thought of the black church as mainly a reactionary power" (203). But the melodies played in the church are martial ones, the minister's sermon is overtly political, a photograph of a martyr from the Civil Rights struggle is displayed, and the traditional Christian icon in the stained-glass window has been replaced by an image which connotes both the Afro-American blues tradition and militant resistance. A central aspect of the ceremony is the presence of the martyr's father, attempting, as a reminder of the struggle to the people in the church, the repetition of a memorised speech, beginning "'My son died'" (202). Immediately after this ritual, the music rises, "the sweet music that received its inimitable soul from just such inarticulate grief as this ..." (202).

The experience in the church is a crucial one for Meridian. Suddenly she understands the meaning of the ceremony in the church, with its unique combination of spirituality and militancy. Its force is to create the possibility of political action informed with sanctity and a respect for life. Meridian realises that only on this basis is revolutionary violence possible. The ritual in the church is a religious ritual with a radical political meaning: "'the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can'" (204). In understanding this, Meridian understands her own position in relation to it. She understands that, as an individual, she will fight for her own life. But she will also fight for the lives of others, because they are part of her as she is part of them:

For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life. (204)

Meridian's promise, however, falters from time to time. At these times, she feels that she herself would not be able to kill. What she could do, she feels, would be "to walk behind the real revolutionaries ... and ... come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear"

(205)--provide, in other words, the spiritual sustenance and healing which is essential to the health of the peoples' soul. At other times her rage at the manifestations of oppression is so powerful that her dedication to her promise returns with an overwhelming intensity.

In the chapter entitled "Pilgrimage" Meridian goes with Truman to visit a young girl who has murdered her child. This murdered child, of course, is yet another in the long list of dead or abandoned children in the novel. Meridian is overcome with grief at the experience in the prison: the experience of the damage caused to people in a society where mothering is a burden which causes unbearable stress. The young girl tells them that in killing her child she has killed her own heart. Yet it is clear, in the circumstances, that she had no alternative: her mother has rejected her early, and she has no other resources. Of course Meridian's response to her is intense, for she sees in her what she herself could have been. In some ways she represents Meridian's dark side: she, like Meridian, is in a cell, not the ascetic cell of the saint but a prison cell. And she, like Meridian, has been a mother who rejected her child. But she has not been able to survive the experience as Meridian has, and society is in the process of destroying her. The theme of forgiveness here reaches a peak. Meridian, having known her own guilt (whatever its causes), having been enabled to forgive herself and to forgive others

whom she knows, attains a degree of compassion that is all-embracing and a clarity about the task that impels her:

i want to put an end to guilt  
 i want to put an end to shame  
 whatever you have done my sister  
 (my brother)  
 know i wish to forgive you  
 love you  
 it is not the crystal stone  
 of our innocence  
 that circles us  
 not the tooth of purity  
 that bites bloody our hearts. (219)

The poem that Meridian writes after this one is evidence both of the nature of her quest and its outcome:

there is water in the world for us  
 brought by our friends  
 though the rock of mother and god  
 vanishes into sand  
 and we, cast out alone  
 to heal  
 and recreate  
 ourselves. (219)

Meridian has taken on the solitary journey, deprived of the supports of family, religion, society. In doing so, she has become healed, recreated, cleansed: and she has discovered community and friendship. The relevance of the image of the Sojourner sprouting a branch is clear. This is an image of Meridian herself: the black woman, who, in searching for and discovering her own damaged roots, her own lost history, becomes renewed. Meridian is now becoming stronger; her illness, which has almost killed her, has gone. She can now, in the words of the last chapter, "Release" "return to the world" (227). As she is

preparing to leave, the following exchange between Meridian and Truman occurs:

"I hate to think of you as always alone."  
 "But that is my value," said Meridian. "Besides, all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth." (227)

This is a key statement of the nature of Meridian's quest. It is to an extent a solitary quest, yet it prepares for a "gathering." Its very solitariness highlights Meridian's courage in embarking on the journey she undertakes. Yet, it affirms the possibility of community. Meridian insists on the connection between the personal and the political, between self and history. DuPlessis states that

[Meridian] understands that it is neither in punitive or transcendent individual love, nor in punitive or transcendent individual death that her "ending" will be written, but in a "communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence," which has both a spiritual and political meaning. (Writing 161)

This affirmation contrasts with the ethos of Grange's quest in Grange Copeland, in which Grange's most powerful impulse on his return from the North is a wish to withdraw from the world, to disengage from the social and the political, to which end he buys himself a small farm where he and Ruth can be alone. It is most evident in Meridian's decision to work among rural communities in the South, and her sense when she is in the militant church that her struggle



"extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life" (204). In the South, however, Meridian is heroic, singular, individual, and although she acts for the community, and occupies a special place within it, she is not of the community--she comes in and she leaves again. (She moves through the Saxon community as well, though with less sense of commitment to it.) She does not become integrated into the Southern community, and at the end of the novel, when she prepares to leave the South to "return to the world" (227), we do not have a sense of what that world is, how it will accommodate Meridian, or whether there will be a community for her there. She says to Truman that she, and those like her in aloneness, will "gather at the river," yet that gathering is yet to come in the mythical future of "one day" (227).

The Color Purple is very different from this. For in The Color Purple the "gathering" is imagined, perhaps not at "the river," but certainly in a kind of visionary future in which human beings have learned to live together without exploiting one another; and the quest, although centrally figured through the transformation of one individual, involves quite polemically the transformation of the community and takes place through the community. The "gathering," then, that Meridian envisions is inscribed in the narrative process of The Color Purple. I now turn to examine this process.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The Female Quest in The Color Purple: A Community

## In Quest

In twentieth-century narratives by Richardson, Hurston, and Walker, female quests end differently. The hero is a representative of a striving community, breaking with individualism in her rupture from gender-based ends. She encompasses opposites and can represent both socio-cultural debates and a psychic interplay between boundaries and boundlessness. In the distinctive strategy of the multiple individual, the female hero fuses with a complex and contradictory group; her power is articulated in and continued through a community that is formed in direct answer to the claims of love and romance. (DuPlessis, Writing 142)

When we open The Color Purple, we are introduced to a character whose powerlessness in society appears total. Celie is poor, young, black, female, uneducated, and apparently unpretty--all the terms in Western society which determine a person less than privileged. She has no access to any institutions or instruments of power, no resources to help her resist the the violence--physical and psychic--that is perpetrated against her. She is a victim in the most extreme sense. Like Margaret and Mem in Grange Copeland, and Roselily in the short story of the same name, she is one of the "suspended" women of Walker's cycles, "the girl / with the dark skin" and the thin shoes, who is "holding their babies / cooking their meals" and "sweeping their yards," trapped within childbearing, rural poverty and male

brutality. How is a person like Celie to quest? As an uneducated black woman, the domestic drudge at the heart of her community, she is unable to leave it. She has neither the resources for escape nor is she awake to the desire. Meridian enjoys a certain degree of privilege--she at least has a basic education and is offered an escape from her home circumstances through the scholarship to Saxon College. Celie goes only from her stepfather's house to Albert's, geographically not a long journey, and leading to a place circumstantially very similar. Both houses are places where she suffers physical, psychic and sexual abuse at the hands of men --her stepfather and her husband. They are both places where she has to carry the domestic workload and take care of others. What are the opportunities for growth and psychic transformation for Celie?

The opportunities, in The Color Purple, are people. In contrast to the bleak isolation of Margaret and Mem, coupled with the brutality of their husbands, Celie finds people at Albert's house. Centrally these are women, who live there, or who come and go, through and with whom she finds herself, and who help her, as she helps them, "to Bloom" (Walker, Revolutionary Petunias 70). The Color Purple tells Celie's story: but Celie's story is at the same time the stories of Shug, Sofia, Mary Agnes, Nettie--and to a lesser extent, Albert and Harpo. DuPlessis' comments about Meridian as a novel with a multiple protagonist (a feature

which it shares with Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God) are even more pertinent with relation to The Color Purple:

The story [Meridian] seems to be Meridian's biography.... Yet ... it is even more a retrospective study of black women. Meridian is, in fact, a collective biography of a multiple individual, who articulates social and spiritual questions. [Meridian] tells the stories of many women, along with Meridian's own single tale, and thus relocates the individual hero in a narrative multiplicity that is both matrifocal and conflictual, registering the heritage of debates and struggles among the women who are detailed. (Writing 158)

What Walker achieves in The Color Purple both through the narrative strategy of the text itself and through the narrative as a whole is a radical rewriting of quest, in which "our twin and triple selves" (Walker, Revolutionary Petunias 66) become a community of people whose own quests for transformation vitally affect one another's. The way she accomplishes this is to use quest features--separation, initiation, return, confrontation with parental figures--in the text, yet, to draw on the quilt metaphor used so eloquently by Barbara Christian in her discussion of Grange Copeland and Meridian in her study Black Women Novelists, these features are reworked to form a new design. This is one in which the idea of the quest as the solitary journey of a single adventuring hero is challenged, quest phases are diffused over different characters, and the "progress" or development of these characters is articulated in terms of social interaction, a very concrete process of relationship and struggle. Even more clearly than in Meridian, "[a]ll

the characters are equally the narrative subject; the 'progress' of each and all is intertwined. Further, within this multiplicity no character goes unchanged, unexamined, unforgiven" (DuPlessis Writing 159). Every single "moment" of change and growth in The Color Purple happens within relationship and in terms of relationship. The quest in The Color Purple is, then, the quest of a community. It happens within a community and in terms of a community. The sense of a network is extremely powerful. Another way of expressing this is to say that The Color Purple affirms the values of kinship, which Michael Cooke defines as "social bonding, a recognition of likenesses in context, concern, need, liability, value" and which, he says, "has become a major option or even program of black literature in recent years" (110). In discussing black women writers who "experiment technically with kinship along feminist lines" he remarks that "Alice Walker makes a tour de force of this approach in The Color Purple" (111). In The Color Purple, however, kinship is specifically inscribed in the bonds between women. The quest happens through the bonding of women, and its outcome is a celebration of that bonding. And this is the centre of the radicalism of The Color Purple--the shift from heterosexual primary bonding in patriarchy of women to men, to a bonding of women with women, of which Caroline Heilbrun says:

It is by now evident to most feminist theorists that female bonding and friendship are at the heart of any transformation of the patriarchy,

just as control over women and their bodies is at the heart of the patriarchy itself, where woman's primary bonding to man is essential. (1)

The quest in The Color Purple, then, cannot be analysed using a schema, like Grange Copeland and Meridian, in which, although community is validated to varying degrees, the quester is essentially alone in his or her trials. The central quester of The Color Purple, Celie, becomes transformed through her relationships with women. The two characters most important to her, Shug and Nettie, function as doubles for her, so that although each develops in her own particular way, together they represent a multifaceted, specifically female potential. DuPlessis notes: "One of the functions of the multiple individual as a strategy would be to absorb and present the plural, contradictory universe in an inclusive, not selective fashion. This may be thought of as a way of achieving a doubled vision" (Writing 156). And although there are phases to Celie's development, these can be seen much more satisfactorily as "nodes of growth" or "moments" in which her consciousness shifts, and a particular kind of awakening occurs. Often these shifts are the result of a particular conversation or experience she shares with another person, and the ground for these moments is constantly being prepared by her daily interactions with such people as Shug, Sofia, and Mary-Agnes. I analyse what I consider the most important instances of these in some detail.

Nettie does leave the parental home. When she goes to Africa to work as a missionary, she takes the physical journey which Celie, because of her position in the community, cannot. Her search is at the most obvious level a search for roots, a quest connected with Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, which started in the twenties. The impetus for this movement, like the impulse of Negritude which it influenced, was the nostalgia for a lost world, a reunion with a primal source. Cooke has noted the myopia of this particular myth, the way Africa is "manipulated as an image" (86). Nettie's journey in The Color Purple attempts (although not entirely successfully) to some extent to shatter the idealistic image of Africa as a lost paradise for black people, to which Afro-Americans could return and be welcomed.<sup>1</sup> The letters from Nettie, as various critics have suggested (Darryl Pinckney, Harris "On The Color Purple"), are less successful than Celie's letters to God. Nettie's Africa is a vague, romanticised construct, seen, in contrast to Celie's community, to some extent from the outside. The lack of specific geographical, social and historical context in the references to Nettie's African community is problematic.

Yet they raise issues complementary to the issues raised in the letters from Celie. Walker is careful not to

---

1. There are a number of Afro-American writers who try to shatter the "Africa" fantasy although not always in the same way. Richard Wright's Black Power (1954) is one such attempt, as is Maya Angelou's latest autobiography All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes (1986).

imply that the position of women is the same in both societies, yet she does suggest that, in both, women are subordinate--and also that bonding between women, although in different ways, happens in both. ("It is in work that the women get to know and care about each other" says Nettie (141).) Elizabeth Fifer notes that "the Southern marriages echo the polygamy of the African marriages, as other women take over when the first wife and mother is removed" (164). Walker herself is quoted by Gloria Steinem on the issue of women in African societies: "We're going to have to debunk the myth that Africa is a haven for black people--especially black women.... We've been the mule of the world there and the mule of the world here" (273). Although I agree with Pinckney's contention that the use of Africa in the novel gives the impression of a "programmatic intention" behind the novel, I feel that it adds a dimension which would make the novel the poorer if it was excluded. Fifer puts it in this way:

Sharply different from Celie's letters in content and style, Nettie's letters move the novel out beyond Celie's microscopic world. Both historical and "pedagogical," they introduce and maintain a different language, and consequently a different consciousness, far distant from the raw emotion of Celie's letters. Their larger African context--epic and unfamiliar--puts Celie's letters into perspective; their emotional coolness helps us bear Celie's trials, intersecting, juxtaposing, providing counterpoint and parallel lines of development.... [T]he substance of Nettie's letters emphasizes how Celie's total environment of emotional relationships is bounded and circumscribed by a ruthless, brutal and destructive exterior world. (164)



The different kinds of consciousness that Celie and Nettie display complement each other. They can be seen to correspond to the different functioning of the two hemispheres of the brain. Celie, predominantly artistic, is more "right-brain." Her mind works strongly in image and metaphor. When she makes a pair of pants for Jack she is able to imagine how they ought to look, to suit him perfectly. Nettie, more "left-brain," is rational, reflective and discursive. She thinks more abstractly and logically. In their reunion at the end it is possible that Walker is suggesting that both modes are important and should not be split off from each other. Space precludes a detailed analysis of the letters from Nettie, although I will refer to them in the course of my discussion.

A striking difference in The Color Purple from the quest pattern in Meridian is that the psychic descent, such a strong feature of Meridian, is not highly evident here. We have a sense of Celie's unconscious at work but this is much more a kind of "unfolding" than a descent--the release of an strait-jacket of repression which allows for the liberation of her self. Here, much more than in Meridian, does one get a sense of an emergence of a "unified self," an embryonic identity that was there but unavailable--whereas with Meridian the sense is much more strongly that she actively seeks and creates her identity. Celie moves in an extremely wide range from the position of "suspended" woman

to "emergent woman." Cora Kaplan calls The Color Purple "a parable of the history of black female subjectivity..." (142). It is in this sense that I understand the magnitude of Celie's transformation--as metaphorical or paradigmatic, and in fact, as Trudier Harris has remarked ("On The Color Purple"), the novel has an atmosphere of fable. Yet Celie never becomes a "hero" in the same way that Meridian does. She has no grand gestures for the world. She is neither an ascetic nor a prophetic figure. What she becomes is an ordinary human being, making greater use of her powers as a human being.

\*

\*

What, then, is the goal of this "re-visioned" quest? Celie's central goal is very clear--it is to find herself, to discover that she exists, and to speak her existence. "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (176). This is the central assertion in The Color Purple. In this sense The Color Purple is a search for self as it is imagined by this particular black woman writer. But more cogently it is an assertion of identity in the face of attempted annihilation--the annihilation and silencing of black women suffered historically since the earliest days of slavery in America:

Black women's existence, experience and culture  
and the brutally complex systems of oppression

which shape these are in the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown.... In her landmark essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker discloses how the political, economic, and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of black women. (Smith, "Towards" 157-158)

The form this assertion takes in The Color Purple is the discovery of voice. This is a search that has long been important in black literature:

The problem of finding a voice haunts black literature.... Either directly or in projection through a central character, black writer after black writer, generation upon generation, from Frederick Douglass to Alice Walker, evinces the problem of voice. (Cooke 81-82)

Certainly Celie, both through her writing and through the realisation of her anger, succeeds in finding her voice. This is one of the main terms of the empowerment which Celie gains in the course of her development--others being the release of her sexuality and her anger, the transformation of spirituality, and her gaining economic independence. Paradoxically, though, Celie already has a voice--it is quite apparent that her unique and "astonishing consciousness" (Fifer 155) is able to express itself with astounding vividness and perception. Walker's use, through Celie, of Southern rural folk speech, is a valorisation of that unique "voice." But Celie becomes conscious that she can use her voice to speak and to assert--whereas in her early letters to God she has been able, possibly, to write at all only because she thinks no person will read her

letters. Over time, she ~~is~~ enabled to write to a real person--Nettie--and to communicate, directly and strongly, her own feelings and needs. The theme of voice is manifested in two ways. Firstly, in the content, through the character of Celie, and other characters and incidents. Shug already has a voice and knows its power, both through her singing and also in the direct, non-euphemistic nature of her speech. Mary-Agnes (Squeak) finds her own unique singing voice. Secondly, it is manifested through the form of the novel--the use of letters as a narrative strategy. This is crucial. So is the fact that the central consciousness is that of a poor uneducated black woman--the kind of person who is historically among the most discounted and silenced of people in the United States. The text asserts in this way the importance and worth of such a person. Trudier Harris has criticised the device of the letters in The Color Purple in terms of a "clash between Celie's conception and her writing ability;" that Celie, being what she was, could not have written such letters--thus she becomes a much more sophisticated character than she is presented as in the novel ("On The Color Purple" 156). I think this is a valid criticism, and it is clear that as a reader one is being asked to "suspend disbelief" and accept the convention of the letters. Yet if one sees The Color Purple as a "parable" as Kaplan has called it, a demand for strict realism is misplaced. A greater problem for me, in terms of Celie's "voice," is that although Celie

has various psychic breakthroughs, a sense of a greater maturity in her voice is not evident--in other words, she doesn't seem much older at the end of the novel than she was at the beginning, even though thirty years have passed.

The novel begins with Celie being ordered not to speak to any human being about what must have been a deeply traumatic, wounding experience. The shadow of "Pa" hangs over her from the first page of the novel. He rapes her, then silences her (as he imagines): "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (3).

(Louvinie, when she spoke words which were unacceptable to her masters, had her tongue cut out.) Walker has treated the incest theme before, in her short story "The Child Who Favored Daughter" (In Love and Trouble). Here, this theme can be read with reference to the silence about incest in western patriarchy in general, and also intertextually in relation to the incest scene in Invisible Man. In this novel the incest experience is presented only from the point of view of the father, and, in the words of Cora Kaplan, "black women are represented by an incestuous daughter who enjoys her father's embrace and an outraged but fundamentally resigned wife" (139).<sup>2</sup> The whole novel is

2. Diana E.H. Russell's recent study of incest in the U.S., The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women, conclusively documents both the high incidence of incest across race and class in America as well as its long- and short-term traumagenic effects. Russell quotes psychologist Gail Wyatt's study on the differential effects of incest on Afro-American and white women: "Afro-American women tended to seek more internal reasons, such as their physical development, as the cause for their victimisation.... This finding, along with Afro-American

constructed in such a way that the development of Celie's ability to speak is foregrounded. The first letters are short, terse, full of suppressed pain. The later ones are long, articulate, full of feelings, descriptions, and chat. The contrast of Nettie's letters with Celie's emphasises the issue of voice. For the voice Celie has--and develops--is undeniably hers. It has not been smoothed out, corrected and standardised as, through her education and environment, Nettie's has. And it is in and through language that Celie constructs new meanings for herself and her life, in and through language that she finds her identity. With the letters, Walker creates an apparently transparent medium for her character. The letters provide the illusion that we are directly party to Celie's consciousness. So although the kind of narrator-reader closeness accomplished by a technique such as interior monologue is not achieved here, a powerful sense of intimacy is created. This is intensified by the fact that Celie addresses most of her letters to "God"--we are almost listening in to someone's prayers. Fifer says that "[h]er letters are an elaborate literary mask, subjective, emotional, affording Celie all the advantageous intimacy of first-person narration and Walker all the distance and control of omniscient narration" (157).

---

women's highly negative reaction to abuse, their tendency not to disclose incidents as often to nuclear family members or to police and to disclose abuse to extended family members, some of whom have been found to abuse them, place Afro-American women at risk for more severe consequences of abuse" (193-4).

Celie starts to write because she is desperate, and has no-one with whom she can speak. The injunction from Pa is one of the things that saves her. She has no friends, and the only person in her family with whom she has any kind of sympathetic contact is her sister Nettie. Her mother is herself a victim who has succumbed to madness, unable to survive in the kind of society in which lynchings of black people, her own husband included, are not uncommon occurrences. Yet, although Celie retains an openness and sensitivity to those around her (such as Nettie and her mother), the way she survives the violence she undergoes is through passive withdrawal--"I make myself wood" (22)--and these early letters indicate the vast suppression of emotions related to the events that have happened to her.<sup>3</sup> For example, when Celie mentions her feelings about the repeated rape by Pa, all she is able to say of what must have been a shattering trauma, is "But I don't never git used to it." At the same time she is sensitive to the feelings of her mother: "My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long" (3). The concentration, yet also repression, of feeling in the terse epigrammatic statements with which Celie describes her life is enormous:

Don't nobody come and see us.  
She got sicker and sicker.

---

3. Russell notes that one of the effects of incestuous abuse as reported by the incest victims she interviewed was "becoming more passive; becoming generally more cautious" (140).

Finally she ast Where it is?  
 I say God took it.  
 He took it. He took it while I was sleeping.  
 Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one  
 too, if he can. (4)

It is only much, much later, many years, that Celie can speak of the trauma of her rape; her pain at the loss of her babies and her fertility; and her anger at Pa and at Albert. For the present, she can only submit to the treatment meted out to her, while making abrupt statements that flatly indicate the acres of silent pain within her: "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more" (7). At the same time she tries to protect her younger sister Nettie from the kind of treatment she is getting, and encourages her to "keep at her books" as Celie has not been able to do because of her pregnancies. (The need for education is a theme Walker touches upon frequently in her writing.) Celie is foisted onto Albert, as second choice after Nettie, on the strength of her sheer utility value--she's clean, works hard, and, as Pa remarks (calling on the vengeful projected image for something he himself caused), "God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (10).

The Color Purple, according to Kaplan, offers "a paradigm of change through the agency of black women" (140), and (in terms of what one could call the larger goal of Walker's quest in writing the novel) is a political project which represents a specific intervention in the



politics of race and gender in the United States--an act of resistance against the oppressive order of an androcentric, racist society. (The novel does not, however, deal with issues of the economic relations of capitalism. This is problematic.) With relation to this project, Kaplan speaks eloquently about The Color Purple as "a parable of the history of black female subjectivity--a psychic history which relates to other fictional and historical accounts of such subjectivity" and which demands "to be read intertextually with other discourses, other fictions as part of a wider debate" (136). About writing by Afro-American male writers, for example, she says:

It is especially useful perhaps to be aware of how the black women's experience in the southern settings of the work of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison has been handled, if we want to assess Walker's radical intervention into the field of black writing. I feel strongly that these intertextual relationships--ones which explore Walker as a writer explicitly in resistance to existing fiction and politics--must be understood and developed.... (138)

Kaplan refers to these three male writers to illustrate ways in which female subjectivity is negated or limited in these works. I have mentioned the incest theme in relation to Invisible Man. Richard Wright's Black Boy is another text with which, as an autobiography, The Color Purple can usefully be compared in terms not only of its negative representations of black women but also of its discursive, distanced and distancing style, which could be read as a "masculine" coolness and control, in contrast to the direct

engagement with human beings and the world which is characteristic of Celie's autobiographical discourse. Another discourse against which The Color Purple might be read, suggests Kaplan, is historical: "At a different and more immediately political level, The Color Purple intervenes in a long-standing historical and political debate about the signification and the 'real' history of black familial relations since the eighteenth century" (140). In evidence Kaplan refers to the Moynihan report which encouraged the "pathologising of the black family" as a "strategy for displacing the causes of black poverty" (141). I refer to some of these discourses in my discussion of The Color Purple.

### Female Bonding and the Quest

Female bonding, the pivot of The Color Purple, is the way in which the quest happens. To return to Kaplan's remark that "The Color Purple ... [offers] a paradigm of change through the agency of black women" we could extend it to say, "black women in bonding." What is important in this bonding is the nature of the relationships between women. Some of the elements that define these relationships are, for example, interdependence, honesty, support in various areas, sharing of work and play, and acceptance. Female friendship is important in Meridian,

but it is something struggled for and achieved. It is one of the goals of the quest, rather than one of the means to the quest, which is more clearly its function in The Color Purple. It is evinced in The Color Purple in various ways--most distinctly in the relationship between Celie and Shug, but also in the relationship between Celie and Sofia, between Sofia and Mary Agnes, and in general in the various daily interactions between women. Relationships between women in the novel are more central to their emotional lives than their relationships with men. It is in these relationships that the real intimacy occurs, intimacy arising from sharing feelings and shared experiences, from making quilts together and from supporting one another in child-care and work. It is the women in this novel who nurture each other. They do not expect, nor do they get, nurturing from men. Moreover, in terms of the way the novel is written, we are given a sense of knowing, of being close to, the female characters in the novel. This is notable because it happens in spite of the first-person epistolary mode, which is limited to the consciousness of the first-person narrator. Events and processes which occur are recorded only in terms of the perception of this single "I-as-protagonist" narrator. Yet, because Celie reproduces a lot of dialogue, and has a sharp eye for the telling detail, the other female characters are skilfully and thoroughly developed and we have a powerful sense of them as narrative subjects.

The sense of network that I have mentioned, of immediate, assumed connections, comes very early on in the novel, when Albert's sisters, in an act of solidarity, urge Celie to resist Albert's treatment of her. Kate tells Albert to "[b]uy Celie some clothes" and goes with Celie to the store to buy them. Celie, overwhelmed by this experience, tries to tell Kate how she feels but Kate says: "It's all right, Celie. You deserve more than this" (20). But the first real friendship Celie develops is with Sofia, Harpo's wife and Celie's step-daughter-in-law. This friendship is an example of the kinds of relationships that happen between women in this novel--relationships based on choice and trust rather than on dominance/submission or coercion. An encounter which Celie has with Sofia results in preparing the ground for one of the shifts in consciousness that happen to her as part of her development or awakening. The two women are, however, very different. As I have noted, Celie is a survivor, while Sofia is a fighter. She is large, muscular and strong, and unafraid of Harpo. Through her, Walker affirms the value and beauty of size and strength in women. (It is telling, however, as Harris has remarked, that Sofia is punished for her power. She says "Sofia ... is beaten, imprisoned, and nearly driven insane precisely because of her strength" ("On The Color Purple" 157)). Both Celie and Harpo are threatened by Sofia's assertiveness--Harpo because Sofia directly threatens his "masculinity" which, he has learned, is based

on physical and psychic violence towards women,<sup>and</sup> in particular, towards the one he "owns," his wife; Celie because she is jealous of Sofia's ability to do what she cannot do, that is, be unsubmitive. Sofia is not a victim, and, inconveniently, she refuses domination and refuses to be beaten. She pities Celie because Celie allows herself to be manipulated by Albert: "I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. \_\_\_\_ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me" (34). When Harpo asks Celie what he should do, "to make [Sofia] mind," Celie tells him to beat her. Harpo does, with dire consequences (a beating), which he unconvincingly explains away. The consequences for Celie are a guilty conscience that gives her insomnia until she realises why she is having trouble sleeping:

What it is? I ast myself.  
 A little voice say, Something you done wrong.  
 Somebody spirit you sin against. Maybe.  
 Way late one night it come to me. Sofia. I sin  
 against Sofia spirit. (37)

Sofia finds out Celie's instructions to Harpo, and confronts her. The exchange that follows opens up one of the central issues that Celie has to come to terms with in the course of her development, and that is the issue of anger. As we have seen, the way Celie deals with her anger is through withdrawal. But when Sofia confronts Celie, Celie does not deny her culpability, and she is conscious of the reasons for it: "'I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I

say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't'" (38). What Sofia does that Celie is unable to do, as Celie acknowledges, is to fight. Sofia locates this ability in her family history and her response to it:

"All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house." (38)

Celie apologises to her and their conversation shifts to a tone of greater intimacy. They exchange confidences about their families. Sofia asks Celie: "What you do when you git mad?" (39). Celie's account reveals the effect on her of one of the primary means of repression in western society--religion: "Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what." The consequences of this repression are physical: "Then after a while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up." Finally, Celie tells Sofia about the strategy that she has developed to cope with this denial of her feelings: "Then I start to feel nothing at all" (38). She tells Sofia with resignation that when she does start feeling angry with Albert, she talks to God, and anyway, "Heaven last all ways" (39). This reliance on religion, the future reward as the rationale for quiescent passivity rather than protest against oppressive conditions, is something which is encouraged by the church. Louis Althusser sees the church as one of the "Ideological State

Apparatuses" which use ideology as a means of concealed repression of the exploited classes. Certainly Celie has absorbed the ideology of orthodox "white" Christianity in the U.S. The contrast of Celie's docility in the face of religion with the militancy of the church in Meridian is notable. This docility changes later on in the novel, both because Celie becomes disillusioned with the Judeo-Christian notion of God and also because Shug influences her to think differently. Sofia, however, is not about to believe in heaven's rewards: "You ought to bash Mr. \_\_\_\_ head open, she say. Think bout heaven later" (39). The result of this conversation is that Celie's insomnia disappears, and she and Sofia become firm friends:

Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say. And I run git my pattern book.  
I sleeps like a baby now. (39)

Although the question comes into the open, Celie does not really deal with her anger at this point. Yet the atmosphere of trust and honesty between women that is demonstrated by this conversation is clearly an essential part of Celie's growing ability to get in touch with and speak her anger, which becomes apparent later when she defies Albert. From then on, Celie and Sofia are firm friends. Their relationship in the novel is pictured as one of easy and warm intimacy, in which they make quilts together and discuss their relationships with men. Celie,

for example, is concerned about Harpo's psychic dislocation resulting from his inability to cope with a relationship in which the woman is an equal partner, and points out to Sofia with her characteristic sharpness: "He trying to git as big as you ..." (58). She speaks to Harpo, too, and tries to make him see the value of what he has in Sofia (57). This quality of easy intimacy, of solidarity between women, is one of the most striking characteristics of this novel.

Another example is the relationship between Sofia and Squeak, Harpo "little yellowskin girlfriend" (71).

Although there is initially rivalry between them when Sofia returns, and Sofia knocks two of Squeak's teeth out, Squeak looks after Sofia's children when she goes to prison. Says Celie: "She look a little haggard with all Sofia and Harpo children sprung on her at once, but she carry on. Hair a little stringy, slip show, but she carry on" (80). Squeak tries to get Sofia out of prison by approaching the warden whose brother happens to be her father (and gets raped in the attempt). Later, Sofia helps Squeak when she wants to go off and sing, by offering to look after her daughter, Suzie Q.

But the most intimate relationship between two women in the novel is the relationship between Celie and Shug. Shug occupies a special place in the novel for a number of reasons. Shug will be the first person with whom Celie has a relationship in which she is engaged on many levels: sensual, emotional, nurturing, learning. It is largely



with and through Shug that Celie is enabled to change. In terms of the theme of female bonding in the novel, it is Celie's relationship with Shug which is central to her development. It is through her that Celie discovers her sexuality, and it is in her arms that Celie releases her pain and becomes able to feel. It is Shug who provides an example for her of what a woman can be--confident, sexual, assertive, creative, self-sustaining, and joyous. It is Shug who goes with Celie to Pa's house, who supports her and understands her needs, who pushes her when she needs it, and contains her in crisis. It is through and with her (though not only) that Celie comes to terms with the central issues in her life of sexuality, anger, economic independence, creativity, spirituality and love. It is Shug who is consistently with Celie in her major "moments" of awakening. She is a quest-guide for Celie, and a role model who challenges with her behaviour and attitudes the gender-role stereotyping that has been part of Celie's socialisation. She relates to women, for example, in a way quite different from the way Celie is used to. In the novel she is very clearly a sexual subject rather than a sex object.

### Shug Avery

Throughout the novel Shug is a symbol of female sexuality, and, as such, represents a powerful refutation of the representation of black women in much of the fiction by

black male writers. Celie often describes her in sexual terms. She wears, for example, a "skintight red dress look like the straps made out of two pieces of thread" (64), or a "gold dress that show her titties near bout to the nipple" (71). This kind of description reflects to some extent Celie's perception of Shug and the sexual attraction Celie feels for her. This is quite evident the first time Celie baths Shug, an incident which has the qualities both of a kind of religious ritual and of a sexual encounter. When Celie first sets eyes on Shug naked, she tells us: "I thought I had turned into a man." She is quite overcome with excitement and desire: "My hands tremble and my breath short" (45). This is a description of Celie's response to Shug. Yet at the same time, the way Shug responds to Celie's attentions, how she herself speaks about sexuality and her own sexual history, the attitudes to sex that this reveals, how she adorns her body and feels pleasure in her body--all of these indicate that she is also a deeply sexual woman in her own right, not just in Celie's perception of her. Shug is, moreover, usually associated with the colours pink or red--colours with strongly sexual connotations. She is spoken of by Celie as a "rose" (167) (Celie describes her own vagina as a "wet rose" (69)). And the house that Shug wants to build for herself is round and pink, "like some kind of fruit," with "a lot of trees round it" (177). She is openly erotic, quite straightforward about the fact that she likes to fuck, and that her

relationship with Albert is based on their making love well together: "Nature said, You two folks, hook up, cause you a good example of how it sposed to go" (105). She says to Mary Agnes, to her shock:

"I tell you something else..., listening to you sing, folks git to thinking about a good screw."  
 Aw, Miss Shug, say Mary Agnes, changing color.  
 Shug say, What, too shamefaced to put singing and dancing and fucking together? She laugh.  
 That's the reason they call what us sing the devil's music. Devils love to fuck. (99)

Like Feather Mae in Meridian, Shug's spirituality is not divorced from eroticism and sexuality. She does not dichotomise God and the devil. She tells Celie: "God love all them [erotic] feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more" (167). Yet, in the terms of Walker's text, Shug's sexuality is defined by herself, not by the male gaze of patriarchy. Shug controls her own sexuality, is conscious of it and enjoys it. Comparing the construction of female sexuality in novels by black male writers such as James Baldwin and others with a text like The Color Purple evinces an enormous difference. In Baldwin's Another Country, to note one example, women's sexuality is defined only in terms of and for men. Women are heterosexual and male-identified. And they are described in the terms that patriarchy uses to reduce women to objects, objects inherently sexual. They are either whores or mothers (although they can be both). The "good" white female

character, although a mother, becomes a whore (or is seen as a whore when she is unfaithful to her husband). The sexuality of the central black female character is described as a "savage jungle river" which the male penetrates (177). She herself turns out to be a whore until she redeems herself with confession to her lover. (Her lover, the white male character, does not deem it necessary to confess his homosexual encounter with a friend.) Masculine sexuality in the novel is consistently defined as violent, raping and cruel; the male genital is described as a "weapon" (22) which "rend[s] and tear[s]" the "wound" of the woman's genitals (308). This is essentially a pornographic view of sexuality. (I accept Catherine MacKinnon's definition of pornography as "the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words" (qtd. in Rosemary Tong 7). To go further afield, a novel like the African writer Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana is also pornographic, although in a different way. It obsessively portrays the female body as an object for the male gaze--an object which is almost nothing but purely sexual, and in which that sexuality is only for male pleasure. Male violence towards women in sex is portrayed as "natural" and enjoyed by women. These attitudes are present in The Color Purple, but they are criticised, as they are criticised in much of Alice Walker's work. And women in The Color Purple, especially Shug, are portrayed as sexual subjects, not objects.

This perspective is reinforced by Shug's role as a blues singer. As such, she represents a particular aspect of Afro-American cultural history. She claims to be an "old friend" (64) of Bessie Smith, who herself signifies a particular moment in that history. Michelle Russell, discussing black women blues singers who raised their voices "in resistance to death and slavery," names five in particular: Bessie Smith, Bessie Jackson, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone and Esther Phillips. These, she says, "recall the worst aspects of our collective situation and teach us how to wring from that the best transformation consciousness can achieve at precise moments in history. They are the bearers of the self-determination tradition in Black women's blues" (130). Russell suggests that Bessie Smith, through her music, claimed sexual subjectivity for Black women in America:

Bessie Smith redefined our time. In a deliberate inversion of the Puritanism of the Protestant ethic, she articulated, as clearly as anyone before or since, how fundamental sexuality was to survival. Where work was often the death of us, sex brought us back to life. It was better than food, and sometimes a necessary substitute.

With her, Black women in American culture could no longer just be regarded as sexual objects. She made us sexual subjects, the first step in taking control. She transformed our collective shame at being rape victims, treated like dogs, or, worse, the meat dogs eat, by emphasising the value of our allure. In so doing, she humanised sexuality for Black women. (131)

Celie and Shug

It is not surprising, therefore, that the relationship between Shug and Celie should be an erotic one. When Celie sees the photograph of Shug, "[t]he first one of a real person I ever seen" (8), which becomes talismanic for her, she is attracted to Shug immediately, and describes her with complexity and perceptiveness. She begins to dream regularly about her. Shug is for Celie "the most beautiful woman I ever saw," and "bout ten thousand times more prettier then me." She is also sensuous and animal-like, dressed in "furs" with "[h]er hair like somethin tail" (8). The impression of Shug's sensuous animal quality is repeated, with the addition of a quality that is slightly sinister and threatening, when she arrives at Albert's house, wearing a hat with "chickinhawk feathers" and carrying a "snakeskin bag" (42). In the photograph, she is racy and flashy, "with her foot up on somebody motocar" (8). Shug represents everything that Celie is not. She is rich, exciting, beautiful, sexy and confident, and seen through Celie's eyes, she takes on quite magical qualities and enters Celie's consciousness in a very powerful way. But Celie, with her infallible eye for fine detail of body and behaviour, does not miss Shug's quality of sadness and seriousness. This suggests a vulnerability in Shug which makes it possible for Celie to care for her later. Without it, Shug would simply have been beyond Celie's reach.

Celie becomes sensitive even to the mention of Shug's name: "My ears perk up when they mention Shug Avery. I feel like I want to talk about her my own self" (20). The phrase "to talk about her my own self" (my emphasis) adumbrates the closeness between her and Shug that will be achieved (as well as underlining the theme of the quest for identity).

At this point Celie (but for her letter-writing) is still a silenced woman, and, even though exhorted by Albert's sister Kate to resist the treatment she received from Albert and his children, is unable to fight for herself and deals with the abuse and violence she receives from Albert with withdrawal and repression:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man. (22)

Yet when Celie hears about Shug coming to town to sing, she is overcome with excitement and anticipation: "Lord, I wants to go so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her" (25). Before Shug even arrives in town, her influence on Celie's relationship with Albert can be felt. An exchange between them happens which has warmth and affirmation in it, new qualities in their relationship. This is characteristic of the way change

happens in the novel, of the emotional webs. Celie says to Albert when he dresses up to see Shug for the first time:

You looks nice.... Any woman be proud.  
 You think so? he say.  
 First time he ask me. I'm so surprise, by the  
 time I say Yeah, he out on the porch, trying to  
 shave where the light better. (24).

The fact that Albert is interested in Celie's opinion is an indication that he has begun to perceive her more as a person and perhaps less as an object simply for his use. Celie feels a loyalty towards Shug when the preacher slanders her even before she has met her. Soon after Shug arrives at her home, Celie begins to notice Albert's weaknesses. She is beginning to feel a little stronger in herself: "I look at his face. It tired and sad and I notice his chin weak. Not much chin there at all. I have more chin, I think. And his clothes dirty, dirty. When he pull them off, dust rise" (43-44). Celie becomes nurturer and companion for Shug, and the relationship between them develops subtly and quietly. Celie takes care of Shug, washes her hair, talks to her, gets her to eat. That Shug is ill shows her to be vulnerable and needy, bringing her into the realm of the human for Celie. Shug accepts Celie's attentions, taking them, it appears, for granted--a hint of the selfishness which is an aspect of her character (Shug to a great extent does as she pleases to fulfil her own needs). But then she begins to relax into



being with Celie, and, in quite spontaneously making up a song for her, begins to reciprocate Celie's attentions:

What that song? I ast. Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention sing. She hum a little more. Something come to me, she say. Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my head. (48)

→  
 The presence in the house continues to add dimensions to Celie's relationship with Albert. They bond together, for example, against Albert's father and brother in common loyalty to Shug: "Then I see myself sitting there quilting between Shug Avery and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Us three set together gainst Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right" (52). Trust grows between Shug and Celie. Celie is overwhelmed when Shug sings her song to her at Harpo's jukejoint: "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (65). "Naming," in the The Color Purple, is another source of strength for women. Then Shug discovers that Albert beats Celie, and, in an act of loyalty characteristic of the way relationships develop between women in the novel, vows not to leave "until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" (67). The important sexual incident which follows arises out of the trust that has developed between Celie and Shug. This is the moment in which Shug introduces Celie to her body and her sexuality--a central experience for Celie which starts her thinking about the possibilities of her own body for pleasure, possibilities she has never entertained

or even suspected before. Shug finds out, to her astonishment, that Celie has never enjoyed sex at all, neither with Albert nor with anyone else. She encourages Celie to look at her vagina and tells her about her clitoris. Celie is amazed to discover the beauty of her vulva and its potential for sensation:

I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she say from the door.  
 It mine, I say. Where the button?  
 Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.  
 I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash. Maybe. (69-70)

Shug's openness about sexuality in this incident and Celie's readiness to go along with her are significant with relation to the elements of prudishness in Afro-American culture. I have quoted Barbara Smith's remarks about this in my previous chapter on Meridian, when discussing Meridian's own ignorance in sexual matters. Walker herself refers to this issue in an article in Ms:

In her [Celie's] backward, turn-of-the-century community the words "penis" and "vagina" did not exist. Indeed, so off limits was any thought of the penis that the closest anyone got to it in language was to call it "the man's thing." As for "vagina"--well, this is how my grandmother taught her girls to bathe: "Wash down as far as possible, then wash up as far as possible, then wash possible." ("Finding Celie's Voice" 71)

Although Shug does not use the words referred to by Walker in the quotation, her frank description of erotic pleasure is revolutionary in its context. The next time that sexuality comes up in the novel, Celie and Shug go further and make love. Along with the incident described above, which prepares the ground, this lovemaking represents one of Celie's major "moments" of release or awakening. Furthermore, the lesbianism here represents a kind of "breaking the silence" about black lesbianism. On this issue, Barbara Smith says: "Black women are still in the position of having to "imagine," discover, and verify Black lesbian literature because so little has been written from an avowedly lesbian perspective" ("Toward" 171). Smith goes on to discuss the "leap" that has to be made by black lesbians to come "out" in the face of powerful sanctions not only in white society but by the black community. In The Color Purple, Walker makes this leap in foregrounding a lesbian relationship between two black women. Two things happen for Celie in this incident. Firstly, in confiding her experience with Pa, she releases her pain about Pa's violation of her as a child; and secondly, she becomes enabled through this release to experience erotic pleasure:

Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms around me. They black and smooth and kind of glowy from the lamplight.  
 I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry.  
 Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and

mess up my stocking. How he don't never look at me straight after that. And Nettie. (96-97)

It is clear from Russell's study that negative feelings about sexuality, and lowered self-worth in general are frequent effects of incestuous abuse. The importance for Celie of the release of her locked-in pain to do with this early taboo experience cannot be over-emphasised, nor separated from the release of her sexual feelings, deadened for many years. Shug stays with Celie in her pain, responding with empathy, warmth and nurturing--then she kisses Celie and tells her that she loves her. The surprised Celie finds herself responding with passion to Shug's kisses:

I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug.  
I don't know much, she say.  
Then I feels something real soft and wet on my  
breast, feel like one of my little lost babies  
mouth.  
Way after while, I act like a little lost baby  
too. (97)

The relationship between them continues to be characterised by intimacy and love. But it is most durably a friendship rather than an exclusive sexual relationship, although they live together in Shug's house for a while, which is where Celie starts her business. Although not entirely without feelings of jealousy on Celie's part, it survives Shug's other involvements--her marriage to Grady, her infatuation with Germaine (itself mellowing to a friendship). And although Celie later begins to feel

affection for Albert, she remains lesbian in her orientation and never begins to desire him--men, not surprisingly, are always "frogs" to her.

### Celie, Anger and God

One of the results of the intimacy between Celie and Shug is that Celie, through Shug, learns about the existence of Nettie's letters, and discovers Albert's cruel deceit in keeping the letters from her (100). The anger that begins to emerge in her is directly connected to the release of emotions that has begun to happen for her. Her anger, which is anger no doubt at Pa and at Albert for their abusive treatment of her, is driven to an extreme by his evidence of further ill-treatment. The force of her feelings drives her to near-murder, and she almost kills Albert with the razor. She is prevented from this by Shug. Yet she is so overpowered by her own feelings of rage that she becomes incoherent. She begins to stutter and is unable to speak. Shug takes care of her:

Shug tell everybody I got a fever and she put me to bed. It probably catching, she say to Mr.\_\_\_\_\_. Maybe you better sleep somewhere else. But she stay with me all night long. I don't sleep. I don't cry. I don't do nothing. I'm cold too. Pretty soon I think maybe I'm dead. (103)

Celie retreats into a kind of catatonia, in its own way a descent into the unconscious. It is, at the very least, a total withdrawal from feeling: "I don't even want to say nothing. Where I'm at it peaceful. It calm. No Albert there. No Shug. Nothing" (103). But Shug stays present and available for Celie: "Shug hold me close to her and sometimes talk" (103), reminiscing about her own past, her relationship with Albert, her own meanness towards Annie Julia and to Celie herself. Celie cannot respond: "I don't know nothing, I think. And glad of it" (105). Yet this withdrawal, part of a process towards release for Celie, contrasts with her earlier tendency towards repression, which was more of a static condition than a healing process. It is in getting hold of the rest of Nettie's letters that Celie's anger really begins to become focussed. Celie becomes extremely clear about what she feels about Albert: "How I'm gon keep from killing him, I say" (122). Shug manages to persuade Celie not to kill him, and stays with her while she goes through her grief and anger:

Us sleep like sisters, me and Shug. Much as I still want to be with her, much as I love to look, my titties stay soft, my little button never rise. Now I know I'm dead. But she say, Naw, just being mad, grief, wanting to kill somebody will make you feel this way. Nothing to worry about. Titties gonna perk up, button gonna rise again. (124)

Shug's understanding of the nature of pain and anger, and the process of healing expressed in her comments above

although formulated in commonsense, casual speech, is profound. Her suggestion to Celie to start making some pants is equally constructive in its awareness of the therapeutic nature of creative activity. Celie's next letter to God manifests a new jauntiness, tempered however by feelings of guilt and fear centred on her incest trauma. She is terrified that her children are crazy: "Anyway, is they all right here? Got good sense and all?" (126). It is apposite, then, in terms of the dynamic of the novel, that Celie hears soon after this from Nettie that Pa is not their father. This shock, and the relief of discovering that Pa is not her biological father ("Shug say children got by incest turn into dunces" (126)) precipitates Celie's decision to visit Pa.<sup>4</sup> In terms of the quest motif, this represents a confrontation with parental figures--here, the father. This is attenuated and does not occupy the same measure of importance in The Color Purple as in Meridian. However, the journey to Pa's house and to the cemetery is necessary for Celie to become released from the psychological ties of her unfortunate background. The fact that she is able to make this decision is significant, and implies that she has become freed to some extent of her feelings of guilt and fear arising from Pa's abuse. The letter in which she describes the visit to Tennessee is

---

4. The fact that Pa is Celie's stepfather does not vitiate, in retrospect, the traumatic effect on Celie of his abuse. Russell's research shows that sexual abuse by stepfathers is equally traumatic to that perpetrated by biological fathers. In any event, at the time, Celie believed Pa to be her father.

characterised by imagery of joy and resurrection. It is Easter, both she and Shug are wearing brightly flowered hats and pants, the road is smooth, Easter flowers garland the roads and the birds are singing. Pa's house is a picture of attractiveness. Saffar suggests that this is because it is the "'true parents'" house (it was originally her father's house), which is "quite explicitly a place of resurrection, a place of fertility and abundance in a world otherwise cold, grey and silent" (16). Celie, when she sees Pa, sees a person who has now no longer any power over her. Shug is sharp towards him. But Celie is self-contained, and asks him only one thing: "Where my daddy buried" (155). They go to the cemetery, but because there are no markers on the graves, cannot find anything. In a gesture of joy and release, Celie and Shug dance in the cemetery: "Shug say, Us each other's peoples now, and kiss me" (156). This incident is a watershed for Celie.

Next to change in her perception is her image of God. In this sense The Color Purple is also a spiritual quest with a spiritual goal. Closer to Christ's conception of "powers or forces of being" (10) this God is a different, less puritanical and more accommodating God than the white-skinned old man of Christianity; a God that is no longer a substitute for the lack of nurturing relationships in Celie's life. This pantheistic divinity informs the universe and is part of Celie herself. Nettie's perception of God also changes over the course of the years--it becomes



"[m]ore spirit than ever before, and more internal" (218).<sup>5</sup>

Alan Sinfield sees the spiritual theme in The Color Purple as a "revival of sixties counter-cultural religiosity..." (117), and as a "privatised essentialist humanism" (118). I am suspicious of his denial of a possible spiritual dimension to human experience, without, however, wishing to deny that the notion of spirituality as depicted in The Color Purple can lead to an "escapist" avoidance of social and political realities, or political action. I do not, however, feel that these are necessary consequences. Walker herself has voiced a desire to

"rid my consciousness and my unconscious of the notion of God as a white-haired, British man with big feet and a beard.... [W]hat I've been replacing that original oppressive image with is everything there is, so you get the desert, the trees; you get the birds, the dirt; you get everything. And that's all God."  
(qtd. in Tate 178-79)

This change happens for Celie again through a conversation with Shug, her spiritual as well as her erotic mentor. When Celie voices her disillusion with the God to whom she has been writing, Shug is shocked. But she is quite clear that the image of "God" that Celie has been carrying in her head is produced by the dominant class in its own image--white and male: "How come he look just like

5. The revelations in Nettie's life to some extent parallel Celie's. For example, in the letters following the one in which Celie describes her visit to Pa, Nettie tells Corinne and Samuel the truth about the children; Corinne finally allows herself to believe that Nettie is not the mother of the children and she dies with an atmosphere of peace and trust between them.

them, then? she say. Only bigger? And a heap more hair. How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is getting cursed?" (166). Shug's God is different--she has a much more mystical notion of God--in which "God is inside you and inside everybody else.... God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (166-7). Moreover, Shug asserts strongly here the connection between sexuality and spirituality. She describes her God, and the process of her getting to know "It:"

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all round the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. (167)

*Celie* is amazed--and understands what a restriction her old conception of God has been. She realises with astonishment how blind she has been to the world, to "the color purple," symbol of joy and celebration, and "the little wildflowers." She realises how her discrimination has been affected: "Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. \_\_\_\_'s evil sort of shrink" (168). Yet at the same time, Celie is angry--she becomes angry with her God, angry, indeed, with patriarchy: "Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown" (164). Although

Celie struggles with her anger, it has come right out into the open: "Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it," she says (168). And when the next major shift in her consciousness comes, its manifestation is anger. The process of her self-discovery reaches a climax when she tells Albert what she thinks of him and is able to speak fully both her anger and her existence. She throws a metaphorical rock at Albert--she curses him in speech, in a collective showdown on the part of the women with the men; a scene which represents one of the climaxes in the novel and a consummate example of the multiple protagonist. Celie has begun to know her voice and its power. The showdown comes when Shug announces to the assembled company at table that she is leaving and that Celie is going away with her. Albert immediately tries to stop her from going. "I thought you was finally happy, he say. What wrong now?" Celie is not for a moment taken aback:

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.... You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain't dead horse's shit. (170 - 1)

When Albert tries to hit her, she jabs him with a knife. It is Grady's ponderous comment, when Albert wants to know what people will think if Celie leaves, that "[a] woman can't git a man if peoples talk" (171), that reduces the women to mirth and the men to chagrin as the objects of that mirth. For Grady's comment in a nutshell expresses the

general male attitude to women in this community--that, after all, the highest good for a woman, and what all women must want, is to "git a man," and that "git[ting] a man" depends entirely on the woman conforming to social expectations of behaviour (or at least, apparent behaviour). This the women find ludicrous, and they show it. They find the men wholly ridiculous in their attempts to control them:

Shug say, Ain't they something? Us say um hum, and slap the table, wipe the water from our eyes. Harpo look at Squeak. Shut up Squeak, he say. It bad luck for women to laugh at men. She say, Okay. She sit up straight, suck in her breath, try to press her face together. (171)

*Their humour is*, nonetheless, neither malicious nor destructive towards the men. At the same time Sofia drops the bombshell that she has a child that is not Harpo's--ironically his favourite. Then Squeak tells Harpo that she is going away to sing, and asserts her own value by insisting that Harpo call her by her real name, Mary Agnes--another reference to "naming" as an aspect of the discovery and assertion of self. The theme of female bonding reaches a climax here--the sense of solidarity and strength between the women, their support of one another, and the understanding between them, are strongly apparent. It is in terms of this collective strength that Celie is able to make the central assertion of self that I discussed in the beginning of this chapter:

Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him

straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees.... I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here. Amen, say Shug. Amen, amen.

### Celie and Economics

Celie leaves with Shug and starts her pants-making business. It is significant that the pants change--the first pair is made from "that stiff army shit" while the ones she makes now are from cloth that is "soft, flowing, rich and catch the light" (181). The values implied are anti-militarist, anti-macho and assert the beauty of softness and colour. Shug suggests that Celie employ someone to help her with the pants and she sets up her "Folkspants Unlimited" and thus Celie attains economic independence. The problem here is that Celie in setting up this business slots into the dominant economic system without question. "Folkspants Unlimited" fits into the capitalist model of the small business extremely well. Further, after Pa dies, Celie inherits a house and a store, the results of the bourgeois aspirations of Pa and Celie's father, whose lives are clearly upwardly mobile. Pa has an Atlanta architect to design the house, with tiles "all the way from New York" (207). Celie employs Sophia to work in her store. These enterprises, moreover, are presented as admirable. But the exploitative nature of the economic

relations that they imply is not revealed in The Color Purple. Alan Sinfield states:

We might hope ... for a political analysis of why Celie's world is as it is. In many ways the book attempts this, though the wider determinants of patriarchy and capitalism as they work within the United States are hardly addressed. (In fact, Celie's eventual achievement is incorporation into a liberal and 'affluent' lifestyle, via a small business which she develops from her skill at sewing. (117))

This is an important criticism. The issues of class and the exploitative economic relations of capitalism are obscured in The Color Purple in a way in which they are not in either Grange Copeland or Meridian. For example, in both these texts the material basis of the characters' lives is to some extent at least made explicit. (The causes of the Copelands' poverty, however, are displaced onto the "whites" rather than the economic system which encourages sharecropping). In The Color Purple the links underlying economic processes are extremely unclear. We do not learn, for example, whether Albert is a sharecropper or landowner, and if the former, where the landowner is. We are not told where Harpo gets the money to build a jukejoint, nor how Shug organises her singing engagements. Shug has, apparently, enough money to be able to afford flashy cars and a large house. Was this usual for blues singers? Sinfield answers his own objections to The Color Purple with an accommodatory approach:

My argument is that we should not be surprised or upset to find a mixture of progressive and regressive attitudes in a book like The Color Purple. In fact, to imagine otherwise is to reproduce idealist notions of the intrinsic ideological invulnerability of the literary text.... The Color Purple displays, in ways which it may be easy for us to see from our perspective, traces of the prevailing conditions of its ideological production. (119-20)

To the above quotation I would like to add Light's remarks that "it would surely be worse than perverse if we were only to want fictions in which Celie would remain powerless ... or see her progress towards power as simply an embourgeoisment" (130).

### Finale

Celie feels almost complete. She writes to Nettie: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you be alive and home soon. With our children" (183). Celie's perception of herself has changed too--she can now think of herself as "look[ing] righteous" (185). She communicates a sense of immense relaxation, a confidence and largesse. She is clearly in control of her life. She is able to partake of a little marijuana from time to time without being badly affected. But she doesn't need to, because she "and God make love just fine anyhow." She says to Sofia "Girl, I'm bless" (187) and with these few words communicates her sense of well-

being. In the words of Walker's poem "Remember," she is "the woman: Dark / repaired, healed / Listening to you" (Horses 1). In the last letters Albert and Harpo undergo their own rebirth, Celie inherits her father's house, and Nettie, in the final "return" and ultimate climax of the novel, arrives with Samuel, Adam, Tashi and Olivia, to provide the familial closure of the novel. In the very last letter Celie, having been writing to Nettie, now writes again to God, and to the universe: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (242). The repetition and balancing of the two outer phrases, and the way they enclose the inner ones, indicates an equivalence of "stars," "trees," "sky," "peoples," and "Everything" with "God," an affirmation of the interrelationships in the universe communicated to Celie by Shug. In the words of Saffar, "Celie has made her journey across the darkness of outer consciousness to an epiphany of Spirit. The lessons have been learned, history overcome, the world redeemed" (17).

The Color Purple, then, is a female quest whose goal is not closure in marriage or the nuclear family or death, but the celebration of community and egalitarian social relations. The novel has been criticised for being "utopian" (Light 128). In my view this is not entirely accurate. For example, Mary-Agnes and Grady succumb to a retrogressive habit of growing and smoking large amounts of marijuana--and Grady does not give this up as Mary-Agnes



does. Shug goes off with a young man, and causes Celie much pain. The "utopianism" is confined to the ending--the apparently instant transformation of Albert, the romantic reunion of Celie with her family. I would prefer to call it "celebratory" and "visionary," suggesting possibilities for human social organisation which are based on social relations which are non-exploitative. A greater problem for me is that, because the novel ends with the celebratory reunion, the reader has to infer the direction which the community takes in the future. An enactment of possibilities is not suggested. The novel lacks a sense of how this small rural community can or will interconnect with the larger society, with which it would quite clearly be in conflict. Then, there is the accusation that the novel can be seen as unproblematically recuperating a conservative ideology of community and family which can be linked with "other, less acceptable representations of the American family in the 1980s" (Rachel Bowlby 124). This view is an important one, and it must be acknowledged. It implies, as Bowlby says, a "version of Americanness" in which "the dream of a true American nation would be fulfilled when all barriers to the individual achievement at the heart of American selfhood have been removed" (124-125). Yet it seems to me that Kaplan's remarks about the intertextual resonances of The Color Purple which I discussed earlier in the chapter, are relevant here: "The 'utopianism' of The Color Purple and its seemingly apolitical model of change as

a familial dialectic looks rather less simple when read as a polemic against the deeply negative imaginative interpretations of southern black life in much male black fiction and autobiography" (140). She continues:

Within that political context and the dominant liberal response to it, the reconstruction of 'family life' and the resistance to both heterosexuality and the nuclear family in Walker's novel, must be seen as a feminist response to a specifically racial set of discourses about the family and femininity. (141)

Another area that I would like to touch upon briefly here is related to gender. The question whether Walker dichotomises gender along lines of "good" and "evil" corresponding to "female" and "male" is an important one. I do not, however, think that she does. Female characters in the novel are not presented as inherently or wholly "good," they do manifest contradictions and flaws, except perhaps Nettie, who is a somewhat idealised character. Shug, for example, is initially unfriendly towards Celie and she gets tired and fat when she is on the road too much. Sofia has an uncontrollable temper. There is quite potent rivalry between Squeak and Sofia. On the other hand, while all of the women (the black ones, that is) are able to change, the men are divided between those who can change, like Albert and Harpo, and those who cannot, like Pa. (Samuel, of course, in a static and unconvincing way, is a "good" man already.) This is problematic in formal terms in the novel because, whereas we are given a sense of the

process of change in the female characters, we are not given such a sense of process in the male characters. Thus both Albert's and Harpo's changes seems to happen quite rapidly and to some extent inexplicably--we are told about them rather than being witness to them as is the case with the women in the novel. I think that it is extremely important that men are <sup>shown as</sup> able to change, that they are part of the processes of possibility in the novel. Yet in formal terms the change in the men appears artificial.

I would like to end with some thoughts about the kinds of responses that readers, especially women, have to the novel, in terms of the possibilities it offers for identification and affirmation. It is a novel which is felt as empowering and enabling; "moving and exhilarating" (Light 128) for women. Anselma Jackman expresses such a feeling, using the words of Ulric Rice in The Barbados Advocate:

Knowing that to those who understand no explanations are necessary, and to those who do not understand no explanations are possible; yet we strive, in the words of Milton, "to be sung and proverbied in the streets." (143)

She sees The Color Purple as "an exercise in consciousness-raising" (144) and one to which "black and white women respond" (143). This is not necessarily a universal response. Harris found that many white women "loved The Color Purple" (156) while the black women to whom she spoke had much more ambivalent responses, based on a feeling that

Celie is not a "realistic" character. I feel that the demand for "correspondence" with "reality" is, however, inappropriate in a novel which works more suggestively as a fable or parable. Jackman goes on to say:

Since the voices of black women have been ignored for centuries, dissipated on an unappreciative air, or misappropriated and subverted to the purpose of the dominant culture, they have now found expression in fictional writing. And as they tend to emphasise the differences between an original oral culture and a written one, such voices compel the re-examination of dominant racial attitudes. (143-44)

Jackman's comments are pertinent--and it is at this level that novels such as The Color Purple, in terms of their aims, can be linked with the polemical writings that emerged from movements such as the Black Power, Black Consciousness or Negritude movements, or the Harlem Renaissance. For The Color Purple is an exercise in consciousness-raising, a specifically black, feminist, or "womanist" exercise which states clearly and emphatically: We, black women, exist, we are worthy, we are beautiful, we occupy space in the world, and we will be acknowledged, we will speak and be heard. Whether society will change to such an extent that such assertions become unnecessary, remains to be seen. From this perspective, Alison Light's comment is cogent:

various ways: an improvisation of style, form, structure, language, metaphor and characterisation. In this rhythmic, cyclic play the possibility of another cycle is always implied. Fifer's comment on the letters of The Color Purple, which she sees as "less like parts of a puzzle than parts of a mystery, incomplete and transient by their very nature, without the immediate possibility of closure" (157), could be applied to the three novels taken as a whole.

There are many aspects of this patterning which are themes in themselves, that I have not treated. In Meridian, for example, my focus on Meridian herself was at the cost of other characters such as Lynne and Tommy Odds. Then, there is a subtext at play in the names of the characters, which links with the theme of "naming." Walker devotes a page-long epigraph to an explanation of Meridian's name. Truman's name is prophetic. The Sojourner, Miss Winter, and Saxon College are other names which resonate with metaphor. The chapter titles ("The Happy Mother," "Treasure," "Release") are themselves emblematic. In The Color Purple, colour is an important issue that I have not examined. The colours which Celie wears change from the early sections of the novel to the later ones. The colours that she uses for making different pants are significant.

From the perspective of a "quilt" structure, any incompleteness which might be criticised in the pattern can be read as part of its design. The lack of a fixed historicism in The Color Purple, for instance, ceases to be

problematic. The first two texts, each rooted in a specific historical framework, cover a great deal of historical ground. With these two novels as background, The Color Purple as an experimental novel which mixes historical realism with the flavour of fable is acceptable in its own terms. Taken without reference to the other novels, however, the lack of historicism appears as more of a problem. Another missing piece, which Sinfield noted, is an attention to class and the economic structures of capitalism. These issues are mentioned very briefly in Meridian but not really addressed, and hardly more so in the other novels, although Walker herself has said that she is anti-capitalist (in Tate 183). This absence, in my view, is more difficult to sanction.

Some elements which are missing from this tapestry are missing because the society in which Walker writes is flawed. None of the novels depicts a fulfilled psychosexual relationship between a man and a woman. The few that are mentioned--the relationship between Odessa, Sofia's "Amazon sister" and her husband Jack, and Shug and Albert in their young days--are not figural. The most emotionally rewarding, long-term relationship between a male and a female which is detailed by the novels is the relationship between Grange and Ruth, his grand-daughter--and Grange ends up murdering for Ruth. The novels suggest that, like the limitations of Grange Copeland's quest, in which a masculinist model of quest cannot overcome the

divisions and inequalities of gender in Western patriarchy, so, within this patriarchy, "whole" relationships between men and women are rarely, if ever achieved. Or even between women and women.

Walker's work, as an intervention in the politics of race and gender in the United States of America, challenges the oppressive order of an androcentric, racist society. Whatever its contradictions, it clearly has an important place in the project of finding a voice for black women. In conclusion I would like to quote part of a poem by another writer, who is also concerned with finding and asserting black women's voice(s). Pat Parker's "Movement in Black" is a celebratory oral poem with which Walker's work resounds intertextually:

I am the Black woman  
 I am the child of the sun  
 the daughter of dark  
 I carry fire to burn the world  
 I am water to quench its throat  
 I am the product of slaves  
 I am the offspring of queens  
 I am still as silence  
 I flow as the stream

I am the Black woman  
 I am a survivor  
 I am a survivor  
 I am a survivor  
 I am a survivor  
 I am a survivor

Movement in Black.

Pat Parker Movement in Black (93)

## WORKS BY ALICE WALKER

- Walker, Alice. The Color Purple. London: Women's Press, 1982.
- . "Finding Celie's Voice." Ms 14.6 (Dec. 1985): 71+
- . Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning. 1979. San Diego: Harcourt, 1984.
- . Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful. 1984. London: Women's Press, 1985.
- , ed. I Love Myself When I am Laughing....: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader. New York: Feminist Press, 1979.
- . In Love and Trouble. 1967. London: Women's Press, 1984.
- . In Search of Our Mother's Gardens. 1983. London: Women's Press, 1984.
- . Meridian. 1976. London: Women's Press, 1982.
- . Once: Poems. San Diego: Harcourt, 1968.
- . Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems. 1971. San Diego: Harcourt, 1973.
- . The Third Life of Grange Copeland. San Diego: Harcourt, 1970.
- . You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down. San Diego: Harcourt, 1981.



## OTHER WORKS CONSULTED

- Abel, Elizabeth, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland.  
The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development.  
 Hanover & London: University of New England for  
 Dartmouth College, 1983.
- Althusser, Louis. Lenin and Philosophy. London: New Left  
 Books, 1977.
- Angelou, Maya. I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings. 1969.  
 London: Virago, 1984.
- Atwood, Margaret. Surfacing. 1972. London: Virago, 1982.
- Baer, Elizabeth. "The Pilgrimage Inward": The Quest Motif  
 in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and  
 Jean Rhys. Diss. Indiana U, 1981. Ann Arbor: UMI,  
 1986. 8202939.
- Barrett, Michele. Women's Oppression Today: Problems in  
 Marxist Feminist Analysis. London: Verso, 1980.
- Baldwin, James. Another Country. New York: Dial Press,  
 1962.
- . If Beale Street Could Talk. London: Michael Joseph,  
 1974.
- . Go Tell It On The Mountain. New York: Knopf, 1953.
- Bell, Roseann P., Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-  
 Sheftall, eds. Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black  
 Women in Literature. New York: Anchor-Doubleday,  
 1979.

- Belsey, Catherine. Critical Practice. London: Methuen, 1980.
- Bowlby, Rachel. "Problems of the Progressive Text: The Color Purple by Alice Walker." Taylor 123-126.
- Bradford, Ernest. "Towards a View of the Influence of Religion on Black Literature." College Language Association Journal 27 (1983): 18-29.
- Bradley, David. "Novelist Alice Walker: Telling The Black Woman's Story." New York Times Magazine 8 Jan. 1984: 25+.
- Braendlin, Bonnie Hoover. "Bildung in Ethnic Women Writers" Denver Quarterly 17.4 (Winter 1983): 18-22.
- . "Alther, Atwood, Ballantyne, and Gray: Secular Salvation in the Contemporary Feminist Bildungsroman." Frontiers 4.1 (1979): 18-22.
- Burgher, Mary. "Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women." Bell et al 107-122.
- Caldecott, Leone. "Alice Walker: Enduring in the Face of Everything." Good Housekeeping 127.6 (June 1985): 56+.
- Campbell, Joseph. The Hero With a Thousand Faces. 1949. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972.
- Cantarow, Ellen. "Sex, Race and Criticism: Thoughts of a White Feminist on Kate Chopin and Zora Neale Hurston." Radical Teacher 9 (September 1978): 30-33.
- Christ, Carol. Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest. USA : Beacon Press, 1976.

- Christian, Barbara. "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward." Black Woman Writers: Arguments and Interviews. Ed. Mari Evans. London: Pluto Press, 1985. 457-477.
- . "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood and Alice Walker's Meridian (1984)." Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985. 211-252.
- . Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976. London: Greenwood Press, 1980.
- Cooke, Michael. Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy. London: Yale UP, 1984.
- Cooper, J.C. An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.
- Couve, Cyril. "Psychology and Politics in Manganyi's Work: A Materialist Critique." Psychology in Society 5 (May 1986): 90-130.
- Cox, Sue. Female Psychology: The Emerging Self. Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1976.
- Daly, Mary. Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.
- Davis, Angela. Women, Race & Class. 1981. London: Women's Press, 1982.

---. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." Black Scholar 3 (Dec. 1971): 3-15.

Davis, Thadious M. "Alice Walker's Celebration of Self in Southern Generations." Southern Quarterly 21.4 (Summer 1983): 39-53.

Dinnerstein, Dorothy. The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977.

Driver, Dorothy. "Feminist Literary Criticism." An Introduction to Contemporary Literary Theory. Eds. Rory Ryan and Susan van Zyl. Johannesburg: Donker, 1982. 202-213.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "Psyche, or Wholeness." The Massachusetts Review. 20 (Spring 1979): 77-96

---. Writing Beyond The Ending. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985.

Dworkin, Andrea. Pornography: Men Possessing Women. London: Women's Press, 1981.

Edwards, Lee. "The Labors of Psyche: Toward a Theory of Female Heroism." Critical Inquiry 6.1 (Autumn 1979): 33-49.

Ekwensi, Cyprian. Jagua Nana. 1961. London: Heinemann, 1982.

Eichenbaum, Louise, and Susie Orbach. What Do Women Want? 1983. Great Britain: Fontana, 1984.

---. "Separation and intimacy: crucial practice issues in working with women in therapy." Living with the Sphinx: Papers from the Women's Therapy Centre. Eds. and Intro., Sheila Ernst & Marie Maguire. London: Women's Press, 1987. 49-67.

Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. 1952. Harmondsworth, Essex: Penguin, 1969.

Ensslen, Klaus. "Collective Experience and Individual Responsibility: Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland." The Afro-American Novel Since 1960. Ed. Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer. Amsterdam: B.R. Gruner, 1982. 189-218.

Erickson, Peter. "'Cast Out Alone/To Heal/And Recreate/Ourselves': Family-Based Identity in The Work of Alice Walker." College Language Association Journal. 23 (1976): 71-94.

Ernst, Sheila. "Can a daughter be a woman? Woman's identity and psychological separation." Living with the Sphinx: Papers from the Women's Therapy Centre. Ed. and Intro., Sheila Ernst & Marie Maguire. London: Women's Press, 1987. 68-116.

Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. 1952. London: Paladin, 1970.

- Fifer, Elizabeth. "The Dialect & Letters of The Color Purple." Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies. Eds. Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick. Lexington, KY: Kentucky UP, 1985. 155-171.
- Frost, Robert. Selected Poems. London: Penguin, 1955.
- Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays. 1957. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971.
- Gardiner, Judith Kegan. "Mind Mother: Psychoanalysis and Feminism." Making A Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism. Eds. Gayle Green & Coppelia Kahn. London: Methuen, 1985. 113-145.
- . "On Female Identity and Writing by Women." Critical Inquiry 8.2 (Winter 1981): 347-61.
- . "Psychoanalytic Criticism and the Female Reader" Literature & Psychology 26.3 (1976): 100-107.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes." Critical Inquiry 12.1 (Autumn 1985): 1-20.
- Giddings, Paula. When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America. 1984. Bantam: New York, 1985.
- Gilman, Sander. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." Critical Inquiry 12.1 (Autumn 1985): 204-242.

- Gubar, Susan. "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth." Women's Studies 6.3 (1979): 301-315.
- Gussow, Adam. "The Color Purple by Alice Walker." Rev. of The Color Purple, by Alice Walker. Chicago Review 35 (1983): 124-126.
- Harris, Trudier. "Tiptoeing Through Taboo: Incest in 'The Child Who favored Daughter.'" Modern Fiction Studies 28.3 (Autumn 1982): 495-505.
- Harris, Trudier. "Violence in The Third Life of Grange Copeland." College Language Association Journal 19 (Dec. 1975): 238-247.
- . "On The Color Purple, Stereotypes, And Silence." Black American Literature Forum 18.4 (Winter 1984): 155-161.
- Heilbrun, Caroline. "The Future of Friendship." Women's Review of Books 3.9 (June 1986) 1-4.
- Hines, Darlene Clark. "To be Gifted, Female and Black." Southwest Review 67.4 (1982): 357-369.
- Homans, Margaret. "Her Very Own Howl: The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women's Fiction." Signs 9.2 (Winter 1983): 186-205.
- Hooks, Bell. Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
- Hull, Gloria T. "Rewriting Afro-American Literature: A Case For Black Women Writers." The Radical Teacher 6 (1977): 10-14.

- Humm, Maggie. Rev. of Sexual/Textual Politics, by Toril Moi. Women's Review 1.1 (Jan. 1986): 43-44.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. Their Eyes Were Watching God. 1937. Chicago: Illinois UP, 1978
- Jackman, Anselma. "Response to the Brighton LTP Group Paper." Taylor 143-146.
- Johnson, Barbara. "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God." Black Literature & Literary Theory. Ed. Henry L. Gates Jr. New York: Methuen, 1984. 205-219.
- Joseph, Gloria I. and Jill Lewis. Eds. Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives. New York: Doubleday, 1981.
- Jung, C.J. Memories, Dreams, Reflections. 1963. London: Fontana, 1967.
- Kaplan, Cora. "Keeping The Color in The Color Purple." Taylor 133-142.
- Kojeve, Alexandre, ed. Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit. New York: Basic Books, 1969.
- Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. "Tuh De Horizon and Back: The Female Quest In Their Eyes Were Watching God" Black American Literature Forum. 17.3 (1983): 109-115.
- Lerner, Gerda. Black Women in White America: A Documentary History. New York: Random House, 1972.
- Light, Alison. "The Problems of The Progressive Text: The Color Purple by Alice Walker." Taylor 127-132.



- Marcus, Jane. "Of Madness and Method." Rev. of Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness, by Sander L. Gilman. Women's Review of Books 3.11 (Aug. 1986) 1-4.
- Marks, Elaine and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. New French Feminisms: An Anthology. 1980. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981.
- Marshall, Paule. Brown Girl, Brownstones. 1959. New York: Feminist Press, 1981.
- Matusow, Allen J. "From Civil Rights to Black Power: The Case of SNCC, 1960-1966." Conflict and Competition: Studies in the Recent Black Protest Movement. Eds. John H. Bracey, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. California: Wadsworth, 1971. 135-156
- McCulloch, J. Black Soul White Artifact: Fanon's Clinical Psychology and Social Theory. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- McDowell, Deborah E. "Traveling Hopefully." Rev. of All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes by Maya Angelou. Women's Review of Books 4.1 (October 1986). 17.
- McDowell, Deborah E. "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon. 1985. 262-275.
- . "The Self In Bloom: Alice Walker's Meridian." College Language Association Journal. 24.23 (March 1981): 262-275.

- McGowan, Martha J. "Atonement and Release in Alice Walker's Meridian. Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction. 23.1 (1981): 23-35.
- Mitchell, Juliet and Jacqueline Rose, eds. Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and The Ecole Freudienne. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- Moi, Toril. Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldua. This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981.
- O'Brien, John. "Alice Walker." Interviews with Black Writers. New York: Livewright, 1973. 185-211.
- O'Neale, Sondra. "Inhibiting Midwives, Usurping Creators: The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction." Feminist Studies: Critical Studies. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 139-156.
- . "Race, Sex and Self: Aspects of Bildung in Select Novels by Black American Women Novelists." Melus IX (Winter 1982): 25-37.
- Ortner, Sherry B. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" Women, Culture and Society. Eds. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1975.

Parker, Pat. Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker 1961-1978. 1978. New York: The Crossing Press, 1983.

Parker-Smith, Bettye J. "Alice Walker's Women: In Search of Some Peace of Mind." Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews. Ed. Mari Evans. 478-493.

Perera, Sylvia Brinton. Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women. Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981.

Pinckney, Darryl. "Black Victims, Black Villains." Review of The Color Purple, by Alice Walker. New York Review of Books. 29 Jan. 1987: 17-20.

Pratt, Annis. Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981.

---. "Surfacing and The Rebirth Journey." The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism. Eds. Arnold E. Davidson & Cathy N. Davidson. Toronto: Anansi, 1981. 139-157.

Pullin, Faith. "Landscapes of Reality: The Fiction of Contemporary Afro-American Women." Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1960. Ed. A. Robert Lee. London: Vision Press, 1980. 173-203.

Rich, Adrienne. Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. 1976. New York: Bantam, 1977.

---. On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978. New York: W.W. Norton, 1976.

- Rose, Ellen Cronan. "Birth Marks." Women's Review of Books 4.6 (March 1987): 12-13.
- Russell, Diana: The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women. New York: Basic Books, 1986.
- Russell, Michele. "Slave Codes and Liner Notes." All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: Feminist Press, 1982. 129-140.
- Ruthven, K.K. Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Saffar, Ruth El. "Alice Walker's The Color Purple." The International Fiction Review 12.1 (1985): 11-17.
- Saville, Julia. "The Reader's Quest: Reading and the Constitution of Meaning in Five Novels." Diss. University of Cape Town, 1984.
- Sayers, Janet. Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Perspectives. London: Tavistock Publications, 1982.
- Schultz, Elizabeth. "Free in Fact and at Last: The Image of the Black woman in Black American Fiction." What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature. Ed. Marlene Springer. New York: New York UP, 1977. 316-44
- Showalter, Elaine. A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing. 1977. Rev. Ed. London: Virago, 1982.

- Sinfield, Alan. "Problems of the Progressive Text: The Color Purple by Alice Walker." Taylor 117-121.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism." All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: Feminist Press, 1982. 157-175.
- Smith, Barbara, ed. Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology. New York: Kitchen Table, 1983.
- Spender, Dale. Man Made Language. 1980. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
- Spillers, Hortense. "The Politics of Intimacy: A Discussion." Bell et al 87-106.
- Steinem, Gloria. Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions. London: Jonathan Cape, 1984.
- Stewart, Grace. The New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877-1977. Vermont: Eden Press, 1979.
- Stone, Merlin. When God Was A Woman. New York: Dial Press, 1976.
- Tate, Claudia. "Alice Walker." Black Women Writers At Work. New York: Continuum, 1983. 175-187.
- Taylor, Helen, ed. Literature Teaching Politics 6 Conference Papers. Bristol: Bristol Polytechnic, 1985.
- Tong, Rosemary. "Brief Encounter." Women's Review of Books. 3.8 (May 1986): 7-9.

Towers, Robert. "Good Men Are Hard To Find." New York

Review of Books 12 Aug. 1982: 35-36

Vicinus, Martha. Suffer and Be Still: Women in the

Victorian Age. 1972. London: Methuen, 1980.

Washington, Mary Helen. "Black Women Image Makers." Black

World 23 (August 1974): 10-18.

---. "I Sign My Mother's Name: Alice Walker, Dorothy West, Paule Marshall." Mothering The Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners. Eds. Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownlee. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1984. 143-163.

---. "In pursuit of our own history." Introduction, Any Women's Blues: Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers. London: Virago, 1980.

---. "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies" College Language Association Journal 43.1 (Jan. 1981): 1-11.

---. "Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers." Black American Literature 11 (1977): 20-24.

Weil, Lise. Rev. of The Color Purple, by Alice Walker. Trivia (Spring 1983): 91-94.

White, E. Francis. "Listening To The Voices of Black Feminism." Radical America 18.2-3 (1984): 7-25.

- Willis, Susan. "Black Women Writers: taking a critical perspective." Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism. Eds. Gayle Green and Coppelia Kahn. London: Methuen, 1985. 211-237.
- Wilmore, Gayraud S. Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People. 1973. New York: Orbis Books, 1983.
- Woods, Richard, ed. Understanding Mysticism. New York: Image-Doubleday, 1980.
- Wright, Elizabeth. Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Wright, Richard. Black Boy. 1946 London: Jonathan Cape, 1970.
- . Black Power. London: Dobson, 1954.
- . Native Son. New York: Harper & Row, 1940.
- Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States. London: Longman, 1980.